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Editorial

Contextualization is a word that some love and some hate. There is also a lot of misunderstanding about what contextualization does or does not do. For those of us in the Department of World Mission at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University the term describes the process of presenting the eternal and unchanging teachings and principles of God's Word in understandable ways within each cultural setting. There is no watering down of truth, no adapting the presentation of God's Word to make it more acceptable in difficult cultural settings. Paul Hiebert calls this process Critical Contextualization, meaning a careful process—see a more complete description of this later in my article about contextualization in Cambodia.

This issue of the *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies* focuses on case studies of various attempts to communicate God's message in understandable ways in a variety of cultural settings. One of the challenges facing the Seventh-day Adventist Church is that since it was founded and grew out of a North American environment most church practices, ceremonies, art, architecture, methods for presenting the gospel, appropriate dress, and many other areas of Adventist life are dominated by the American way of doing things.

For North American Adventists and believers in most Western countries this approach to church life causes few problems; however, in much of the rest of the world and especially among people in the world religions of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, the Western flavor of Adventism is a barrier and causes the gospel to be labeled as foreign. We know that the good news is for all and that Jesus Christ is the Savior of all people of the earth, yet too often Adventist mission has been packaged in Western garb that keeps people from hearing about God's love. People should never reject the gospel because it was presented in ways that are comfortable and acceptable in some other part of the world.

Contextualization is a difficult process. This is especially true in the areas of music and art. Most of us have the habit of thinking that "good" music and art are what we like and "bad" music and art are what is different, strange, or unknown. Look at the Thai art in this issue and begin to realize how vastly different the Great Controversy between Christ and Satan can be presented in various settings. Yet, when a Thai person looks at those pictures they are able to understand what is taking place in the battle between good and evil.

Bruce L. Bauer, editor

Greg and Amy Whitsett

Thai Contextualized Art

Art is central to religious experience in Buddhist cultures. Scenes from the former lives of the Buddha adorn temple ceilings and walls. Murals depicting heaven and hell serve to keep the teachings before the faithful who come to worship and meditate. Some paintings are rather basic. Others are intricate and detailed. But all serve a purpose: to teach and remind through painted story.

In the 1980s, a set of four murals depicting four specific and unique Adventist teachings and beliefs was commissioned by Pastor Clifton Maberly who was serving as a missionary in Thailand. His goal was to have these events depicted in a medium familiar to local Thai buddhists so they could wrestle with the new concepts without being distracted by Western art styles. His hope was that if Jesus, Satan and the angels could be depicted using characters similar to those already familiar to the Thai, the viewer would be better able to focus on and understand the truth portrayed in the paintings—the story of the Great Controversy.

After discussing the project with the artist, it was decided to use the familiar Lanna art style. The artist's contribution to the storytelling was massive as he tried to be faithful to the biblical descriptions and also to the aesthetics of narrative art. These four paintings are the works of an artist wrestling to bring together literary descriptions from a range of texts and expressing them in a detail demanding artistic form.

Four years after beginning the project, the paintings were completed and became the subject of much discussion with and by Buddhist scholars and leaders about the use of popular culture for the transmission of religious ideas, as well as for heated discussions about contextualization and the ethics of borrowing art cross-culturally. Perhaps more importantly, however, the paintings were the vehicle for transmission of the Adventist view of the end of earth's history and the transition into eternity.

Today, we are thankful to once again have these paintings coming back to the public. After being stored for a number of years, the Global Mission Center for East Asian Religions recently acquired them and had them professionally cleaned, restored, and digitized. The four original paintings are now on display at Asia-Pacific International University in Muak Lek, Thailand.



Painting 1

The first of the four painting begins with a depiction of the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit and restraining protection of the angels. The artist chose to portray this as a period of darkness with the beginning events taking place inside the mouth of ‘the dragon.’ The world is shown descending into chaos, accelerated by seven last plagues poured out by seven angels while the unrighteous curse God for their troubles.

Occurring simultaneously, but separated from the accelerating chaos (visually separated by a jagged divider), the righteous experience Jacob’s trouble. While they are protected from the chaos and are nurtured by angels, their faces reflect their spiritual anxiety. Then as the unrighteous focus their anger on the people of God, angels that excel in strength defend the righteous, breaking their weapons.

On the far right side of the painting a dark cloud ‘the size of a man’s hand’ expands to form a tunnel-like connection between the world of light (heaven) and the world descending into darkness (earth). The rescuing army led by a rider on the white horse appears travelling to the earth, depicted with all the signs John describes in Revelation 19. Heavenly angels are shown sweeping down to assist the living and risen righteous as they join the rescuing host ‘in the air.’ As this happens, the unrighteous flee and seek shelter in the dark mountains. Birds of prey circle overhead, indicating the end of human life on earth.



Painting 2

This is the second of four paintings and depicts events of the millennium, divided into two scenes: heaven separated from earth. The division is marked not merely by a barrier but by a closed gate reinforced with chains. On earth the Dragon from the bottomless pit roams the devastated earth with his minions. As fallen beings their state and relations are not genial and they turn on each other.

The righteous, upon their arrival in heaven, receive crowns, worship with music and bear flags of victory. Angels are shown moving among the redeemed sharing the records and inviting full scrutiny of the decisions made.

The center of the process is dominated by two Beings on the central throne — Jesus and One unable to be described. In the foreground are the seven flames of the Spirit, and surrounding the throne are the representatives of other worlds—the lion, eagle, bovine and humanoid creatures. All are visibly impressed by the justice and majesty of the Triune God and worship Him.

In the background, the future home of the redeemed is shown still under construction. The tree of life is sprouting across the stream that will become the river of life. The redeemed are sustained in heaven, which is not intended to be their permanent home.



Painting 3

The third of the four painting series takes most of its imagery from the Great Controversy chapter: “The Controversy Ended” and depicts the final destruction of the wicked.

As the New Jerusalem descends, Jesus is depicted sitting in judgement with the law in one hand and a sickle in the other. The unrighteous dead are raised to life and are rallied by demons to join an attack to take the descending New Jerusalem. The cloak that previously hid the invisible world had lifted and now men and demons unite together. Satan (depicted in black) rides a battle elephant and leads the charge against Jesus and the New Jerusalem. The artist included animals in the scene of battle as they are essential to the battle scenes of the Lanna style. To emphasize the symbolic nature of the illustration, he included mythical beasts as well—with humans riding mythical beasts and demons riding natural beasts. Again, the unrighteous are depicted in darkness while Jesus and the redeemed are enveloped in light.

The reading of the names from the book of life; the humble adoration of the saints; the panorama of the efforts of Christ to save them all; the bowing acknowledgement of all creatures; and the subsequent final crowning of Christ follow in succession. The punishing fire from heaven engulfs the unredeemable, and on the extreme left of the painting nothing remains but the cleansing fire.



Greg and Amy direct the Global Mission Center for East Asian Religions. They are thrilled to draw from their 16 years of mission experience to provide trainings, coach indigenous church planters, and develop resources to help our church better understand and address the unique cultural understandings and needs of peoples with Buddhist-shaped worldviews. They have recently relocated to the United States to be closer to their teenaged sons as they transition to adulthood.



Painting 4

The fourth and last painting depicts the New Earth. Taken from various prophecies as well as inspiration from Ellen White's writings, notable elements include: a moon but no sun, the tree of life, the river of life flowing from the throne, and people involved in all the activities of a community within the conceptual time frame of the art tradition (Lanna kingdom). Everywhere are small surprises depicting a community in harmony with each other and the natural world. While angels can be seen busy with their supporting roles, it is essentially a human world. It is a real earth redeemed.

God is also shown dwelling with his people. In one scene he is teaching as people and beasts worship. His 'home' is present and his throne is empty. On stands bedside the throne are the masks God wore when relating to yet unredeemed people of earth—the mask of the lion and the mask of the lamb. But the masks are now on stands, unneeded, as God lives with his people.

Central to the artist's ideal earth are two images: one of the nations bringing gifts of praise to the center of the city, and a beautiful *sala* representing the unity of all flesh in their adoration:

People will come here from the towns in Judah, from the villages surrounding Jerusalem, from the territory of Benjamin, from the western foothills, from the southern hill country, and from the southern part of Judah. They will come bringing offerings to the temple of the Lord: burnt offerings, sacrifices, grain offerings, and incense along with their thank offerings. (From Jeremiah 17)

The artist suggested that the central *sala* also depicts the function and meaning of the Sabbath—rest from all care, and grateful worship of God.

This painting is bordered with a golden decorative border to indicate that it is a vision of the ideal—never before realized, but the hope of the nations.

Jon Paulien

Case Study: How the Apostle John Contextualized

The Structure of the Prologue

Three aspects of the Prologue and its background in the Gospel of John make it clear that in the Bible God meets people where they are. He inspires ordinary human beings to write in the language, culture, and concepts that would be familiar to their original readers. First, John made use, for example, of an early Christian hymn to express his exalted insights into the nature and character of Jesus Christ. Second, he also structured the Prologue in ways that would make logical sense to a Jewish reader. Third, he gave Jesus a title (the Word) that was far better known in the pagan Gentile world than such Jewish titles such as Messiah or Son of Man. By these strategies John, under inspiration, created a Prologue that would speak powerfully to every reader of his day, whether Christian, Jewish, or pagan. These three strategies will be examined in greater depth.

Based on an Early Christian Hymn

First of all, there is considerable evidence that major parts of the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel were drawn from an early Christian hymn. John 1:1, 2, for example, although written in Greek, displays the poetic parallelism so common to Hebrew poetry and song:

In the beginning was the Word
and was the Word with God
and was the Word God
In the beginning was this One with God

The hymn-like nature of the Prologue is further seen in the “stairstep parallelism” of verses 4 and 5.

In him was life
 and that life was the light of men
 and the light shone in the darkness
 and the darkness did not . . .

Verses 6 through 8, on the other hand, return to prose style, contrasting John the Baptist with Jesus. Although it is impossible to determine the exact boundaries of the hymn underlying the Prologue, verses 1-5, 9-11, 14, and 16-18 are clearly in poetic style, while the other verses seem designed to tie the hymn in with major themes of the Gospel such as the role of John the Baptist (1:6-8, 15, cf. 1:19-36; 3:22-30; 5:33-35) and the centrality of believing to Christian experience (1:12, 13, cf. 2:11; 3:16; 4:48, 53, for example). This is not the only hymn reflected in the New Testament. At least three others are probably the basis for the language in Phil 2:6-11, Col 1:15-20, and 1 Tim 3:16.

Discovering these NT hymns leads to a very practical application. Christians often feel isolated from Bible times, thinking that the people were different from us, and that God, therefore, worked in much different ways than He does now. The reality is, however, that early Christians had a lot in common with us. They too sang hymns and met for worship. They too struggled to understand God's will for their lives. John knew, therefore, that it would help them understand his message if he used the language of a familiar hymn.

A Carefully-Constructed Unity

Regardless of the source from which John may have drawn his language, however, verses 1-18 as they now stand are a literary unity. The structure of the finished Prologue provides a second illustration of how God meets people where they are. The literary form common to Hebrew logic is called chiasm (from the Greek letter X [pronounced "key"]). A person produces a chiasm when they reason full-circle back to the beginning point of an argument. The first point parallels the last point. The second point parallels the next to last point, and so on.

The Prologue begins and ends with the Word in intimate relationship with the Father (God: 1, 18). Next comes a comparison and contrast between the role of the Word in the physical creation (v. 3) and his role in the re-creation that comes by grace and truth (v. 17). The role of John the Baptist is twice mentioned at the appropriate counterpoints (vv. 6-8, 15). When the entire Prologue is carefully analyzed, therefore, a chiastic structure like the following emerges:

- A. The Word with God (1:1, 2)
- B. His Role in Creation (1:3)
- C. The Gift of Life and Light (1:4, 5)
- D. The Witness of the Baptist (1:6-8)
- E. The Word Enters the World (1:9-11)
- F. BELIEVERS BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD (1:12,13)**
- E. The Word Becomes Flesh (1:14)
- D. The Witness of the Baptist (1:15)
- C. The Gift of Grace (1:16)
- B. His Role in Re-creation (1:17)
- A. The Word with the Father (1:18)

The arrow shape of the A-F-A outline above illustrates the “X”-shaped nature of chiasm. The direction of thought moves out from the beginning to the climax at the center, then returns in reverse sequence back to the beginning. The author of the Gospel, therefore, communicates naturally in the style of Hebrew logic familiar to him and many of his readers.

Since the key point of a chiasm usually comes at the center, it appears that the central theme of the Prologue is expressed in verses 12 and 13; those who receive the Word and believe in His name become “children of God.” Thus the focus of the Word’s coming into the world is a new creation, the creation of children of God. This theme is expressed in other terms in the Gospel’s statement of purpose; those who read the Gospel and believe in Jesus have life in his name (20:30, 31).

The Background of Term “the Word”

The title of Jesus with which the Gospel opens is a third illustration of how God used John’s experience and background to meet his audience where they are. If John had approached his Greek readers by saying, “Let me tell you about Jesus the Messiah,” they would have said, “Jesus, the what?” and would have felt little interest in the information. If he had talked about Jesus the Son of Man, he would also have interested mainly the Jews. Instead, John chose a title for Jesus that would communicate with power to the Greek mind and to those Jews who were influenced by the ideas of Greek philosophy (and there were many). John called Jesus “the Word.”

In the Greek Old Testament the Word (Greek: *logos*) of God creates, but is not a person; “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made . . . he spoke and it came to be” (Ps 33:6, 9). The “word of the Lord” in this passage is to be taken literally as the powerful and creative expression of God’s speech, not as a person who assisted in creation.

In Prov 8:22-31, on the other hand, there is a person who stood at God's side from the beginning and was an active agent in creation, but that person is called Wisdom (Greek: *Sophia*—a female expression) not Word. So the Old Testament contains concepts that seem related to John's use of the Word but are not identical to it. We must look elsewhere for a more exact parallel.

It is in the realm of Greek philosophy that John's use of the Word finds its explanation. The great Greek philosopher Plato (400 BC) had a very exalted idea of God. But he also had a very negative view of reality as we know it. If the great God is pure mind, and matter is basically evil (as Plato taught) how could the great God "dirty his hands" in the process of creating and sustaining matter? Plato's solution was a personality he called the Word. Plato's Word was great enough to commune with God as an equal, yet humble enough to get involved in the messiness of material things. The Word served for Plato as an intermediate God between the great God and his creation. Later Greek philosophers like Heraclitus and the Stoics expanded on Plato's ideas by identifying the Word as eternal, the creator and sustainer of the universe, and the source of all human reason and intelligence. If all this sounds a whole lot like the New Testament concept of Jesus, we should not be surprised when Ellen White declares that the "spirit of inspiration" was imparted to some of these great Gentile thinkers (1940:33).

Around the time when Jesus walked on this earth, the great Jewish philosopher Philo sought to make Greek philosophy palatable to the Jews and the Old Testament palatable to the Greeks, so he functions as a bridge figure between Judaism and Greek philosophy. It was Philo who saw a parallel between the Jewish concept of Wisdom and the Greek concept of Word. The result was a Jewish Word-personality, which provided the essential background for John's use of the term Word.

For Philo the Word was a "second God," the High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary, an intercessor with God, the lawgiver, the mediator of creation, the mediator of revelation, the sustainer of the universe, and the God of the Old Testament. Philo also called him God's firstborn, his eldest son, the image of God, and the second Adam. Anyone who knows anything about the New Testament will immediately recognize that in Philo, God had prepared the human race for a personality just like Jesus. When John called Jesus "the Word," therefore, readers of the Gospel who had been influenced by Greek philosophy would have recognized the term as expressing everything they knew about Jesus.

I am not suggesting that Philo "influenced" John to rewrite the story of Jesus in the image of Plato. John, rather, was using a similar tactic to that of Paul on Mars Hill. In Acts 17:22-31 Paul tried to reach the philosophers

of Athens by presenting a sermon on the “unknown God which you worship” (17:23). John, in the Prologue to his Gospel, is saying something like, “This Word, whom you worship, is the subject of my book. Reading this book will help you understand him and serve him better.” By this method Greek readers would have been drawn to consider the Jesus of John’s Gospel. God meets people where they are. As a result, inspired writers have always been willing to adjust their expressions according to the needs of their audience. It is the content of the message that is inspired, not the form (White 1958:21, 22).

Missiological Implications

What can we learn from John’s use of Word as a description of Jesus? We should not expect people to appreciate the gospel we preach unless we first make serious attempts to understand them and the way they think. Secular people have not usually rejected the gospel. In most cases they have never heard it, even though they live in the midst of churches, televangelists, and bumper stickers that say “honk if you love Jesus.” Secular people cannot appreciate the assertion “Jesus Is the Answer” when they have no idea what the question is! John’s “Word strategy” teaches us that we need to go the second mile if we wish to share the gospel with our secular neighbors and friends. In the words of Paul, it is only when we have “become all things to all men” that we can expect to “win as many as possible” (1 Cor 9:19, 22; see also Paulien 1993:17-42).

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Bruce L. Bauer

Critical Contextualization: Case Studies from Cambodia

In the late 1960s a struggling Seventh-day Adventist Church was started in Cambodia. By 1975 when Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge took over the country, forcing Adventist missionaries to flee, there were fewer than 40 members—all in Phnom Penh. During the war that followed most of the Adventists were killed, with a few escaping to the United States.

In 1992/1993 hundreds of thousands of Cambodian refugees who had spent years in the refugee camps in Thailand were repatriated back home after the Khmer Rouge was defeated and some sort of normalcy returned to Cambodia. Among those returning home were several hundred Seventh-day Adventist Cambodians who had become followers of Jesus Christ and Seventh-day Adventist members in the camps.

My wife and I moved to Cambodia in 1997 to give leadership to the Cambodia Adventist Mission (CAM). At a workers' meeting late in 1997 the pastors mentioned that one of the challenges they were facing was what to do for weddings and funerals. The pastors were troubled that church members were being married and buried in traditional Buddhist ceremonies; therefore, it was agreed that at the next workers' meeting the group would begin work on developing Adventist Cambodian wedding and funeral ceremonies.

The Process

During the 1998 workers' meeting a complete day was set aside to deal with the issue of weddings. I explained a process called critical contextualization that Paul Hiebert had developed, which involves a four-step process (1985:186-190). The first step is most important—those working on a cultural issue must make the Word of God the basis for deciding lifestyle or cultural issues. Attending the workers' meeting were 17 pastors, so they were in complete agreement with this basic principle.

Second, the group spent most of the morning looking at typical Cambodian weddings in an uncritical way in order to understand the importance and significance of each aspect. I divided the pastors into groups of four or five and asked each group to list all the activities that happen in a typical village from the time a person chooses a spouse, what they do to prepare for the wedding ceremony, and then each aspect of the ceremony itself. In Cambodia, weddings can last from several hours to a couple of days with multiple acts or distinct parts of the ceremony that take place in various places in the community.

Third, in the afternoon we looked critically at each aspect of the typical Cambodian wedding. We created a list of biblical passages that suggested biblical themes or principles that should be used to decide what aspects of the Cambodian wedding could no longer be followed, which ones could be altered, and which ones needed to be discarded because they went against Bible teaching. During this aspect of the process time was spent praying, reading relevant Bible passages, and discussing the deep cultural meanings.

The fourth step in the process was to allow the local Cambodian pastors to decide what could remain, what needed to be altered, and what had to be discarded from the traditional practices. The group prayed, asked for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and then decided how to deal with the issue.

Some of the things that were discarded included having Buddhist monks involved in the ceremony—an activity that was replaced by having an Adventist pastor present a message from the Bible about marriage, love and respect, and principles for happiness in a Christian home. Most of the other practices were left intact so that community members would not call the wedding ceremony *foreign*, but would at the same time realize that it was a Cambodian wedding with a Christian emphasis.

In the end, the pastors were very happy that they had come up with an Adventist wedding that still had a Cambodian flavor. Another benefit from following this process was that the foreign missionary did not impose a ceremony on the Cambodians, rather it was the local pastors who took ownership of promoting a Christian and biblical approach to weddings.

Weddings

Most Cambodian weddings last for several hours and in some cases two or three days. There is a festive atmosphere as the community celebrates the various aspects of the wedding.

One of the first activities is for the bride and groom to go to their parents' houses and wash their parent's feet as a symbol to the community

that they respect and honor them. This aspect of the wedding was kept intact with no changes.

Another activity that was retained was the procession of family and friends carrying gifts of food and drink to the place where the activities would take place. This activity was how the community contributed to the cost of the wedding. This was also retained.

During an early part of the wedding ceremony, the bride and groom would stand before a Buddhist monk with a string tied from the wrist of the bride to her parents and another string from the groom's wrist to his parents. The Buddhist monk would cut the strings and tie them together. This part of the ceremony was altered just a bit. Instead of a monk, a pastor cut the strings and read Matthew 19:5, 6 (NLT). "‘This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and the two are united into one.’ Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together."

By largely keeping this aspect of the ceremony and by reading from Matthew several people in the village mentioned that they had never realized the meaning of the cutting of the strings. This illustrates the importance of good biblical teaching. We took a ritual that was infused with Buddhist meanings and replaced those meaning with biblical meanings. In this case the traditional string cutting was tied directly to a biblical passage that poured biblical meaning into the old form. In order to avoid syncretism it is vitally important to constantly teach biblical principles.

Another aspect of the traditional Cambodian wedding that was altered was that part of the ceremony where the groom would sit on a chair while the bride knelt in front of him with a basin of water to wash his feet. This act symbolized that the bride would respect and honor her husband. We retained this part, but added a second element where the bride then sat down and the groom knelt in front of her and washed her feet. The first time we did this a murmur ran through the crowd, but when we asked them what they thought about husbands also indicating that they respected and honored their wives, there was broad agreement that it was good. Many also indicated that they were happy that Christians were not destroying typical Cambodian culture with Western ceremonies, but were actually strengthening it.

One of the final acts of the wedding was for the bride and groom to recline on a mat facing the audience while friends and family came and sprinkled water on the couple as a sign of blessing while saying a word of encouragement and placing some money in a special bowl. This also was retained with some change. Instead of just giving a personal blessing, the Christians in the audience were encouraged to share a Bible text with the couple.

Funerals

At another worker's meeting in 1998 the group of pastors went through the same process to develop a Cambodian Christian funeral. Again, the first part of the day was spent in groups of four or five listing all the activities associated with a typical Cambodian funeral from the time a person passed away until the last ceremony several years later (in Cambodia and in many Buddhist countries there are ceremonies that take place after one year, after three years, and after seven or eight years). Just before lunch we compiled a master list with all that was involved in a typical Buddhist funeral ceremony and the deep cultural meanings of the various events and practices.

Then in the afternoon, I asked the group to list any activities that they felt went against biblical principles. We listed biblical passages that suggested biblical themes or principles that should be used to decide what aspects of the Cambodian funerals could no longer be followed, which ones needed to be altered, and which ones needed to be discarded because they went against biblical teaching. Again, during this part of the afternoon time was spent praying, reading Bible passages, and discussing the deep cultural meanings.

Finally towards the end of the afternoon session the local Cambodian pastors decided what could remain, what could be altered, and what had to be discarded from the traditional practices. After praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the group decided on a format for a Christian Cambodian funeral.

Some of the things that were discarded included having Buddhist monks chant—an activity that was replaced by having a pastor present a message from the Bible about death and hope in Jesus. The typical Cambodian funeral music that was blared out over speakers to alert the community of a death was replaced by Christian hymns that spoke of hope in the resurrection. Many of the other practices were left intact so that community members would not call the funeral activities *foreign*, while at the same time realizing that there were some elements that were definitely Christian.

Once again it was not the foreign missionary that was imposing a change on the new Cambodian church. Rather it was a group of local pastors who dealt critically with cultural issues and who then owned the final process. They were also the ones who promoted the importance of doing funerals in biblical ways among their members.

Song Book

Another area that needed contextualizing was in the area of music. When Linda and I first arrived in Cambodia we visited different village churches each week. These were out in the countryside where the churches were often simple structures made from bamboo and thatch. There were no musical instruments to accompany the singing so people just started singing in any key they wanted. It was awful as thirty to forty people sang in three or four different keys at the same time. One time they sang six verses of a song and not until the last verse did it dawn on me that they were singing a well-known Western hymn. I also noticed that the awful singing was associated with their attempt to sing foreign songs, but when they sang familiar Khmer tunes they could sing in the same key.

Before we arrived in Cambodia in August of 1997 Mrs. Hearn, a retired music teacher from Florida, had come to Cambodia to develop a contextualized Adventist hymnal. During the summer of 1997 there had been a coup so the Hearn had left and did not return until October. By that time I had heard the chaos and dissonant sounds when Cambodians attempted to sing Western music so I was convinced that the hymnal needed to consist mostly of Cambodian tunes with Christian lyrics.

When Mrs. Hearn returned I talked with her about what I had observed. She was almost finished with the first draft of the hymnal and the songs selected were about a 50/50 mix of Cambodian tunes with Christian lyrics and well-known Western hymns. I asked that the ratio be changed to 80-90 percent Cambodian tunes. Why? Because when the villagers sang familiar Cambodian tunes they sang together in unison. No dissonance, no chaos. It was beautiful.

In the end the hymnal had 83 percent Cambodian tunes with Christian lyrics. Why is this important? There are a lot of different music genres, rhythms, and harmonies. Christian missionaries do not need to teach North Atlantic hymn tunes and traditional Christian hymns to converts in newly developing Christian communities. By teaching Western hymns, missionaries often give the impression that God can only be worshipped by using imported and foreign ways to praise him. Instead local musicians should be encouraged to develop their local genres to express the great themes of the Bible. I believe it is important that when non-Christian people pass a Christian church and hear singing that the tunes and genres not be viewed as foreign, but indigenous.

Dress

Another area that I inherited was in the area of what a Christian pastor in Cambodia should wear to indicate that he was a religious teacher. The previous president of the Adventist Church had insisted that all the pastors wear a white shirt and tie—something that was quite out of place as they traveled to rural villages on motorcycles through clouds of dust during the dry season and sticky gumbo mud during the rainy season.

Again we consulted with the pastors to find what type of clothing would indicate to unchurched people that the pastors were religious teachers. As we talked we found that religious teachers in Cambodia did wear white shirts that allowed them to be recognized as religious teachers. So a group of pastors designed a shirt with a Chinese type collar. The color was not stark white, but rather an off-white that did not show the dust as much. When the pastors wore those shirts they were usually recognized as religious teachers, and by not wearing a shirt and tie they were less apt to be associated with a foreign religion.

Missiological Implications

Why is it important to do critical contextualization? Why not just give new Christian groups the songs, the dress, the religious ceremonies that are commonly used in the West? Why go to all the trouble of developing new Christian forms and rituals in non-Christian parts of the world? There are many reasons, but let me share some of the most important ones.

First, there is a growing sense of national identity around the world. People are proud of their country, their heritage, and their way of life. Therefore, it is important to avoid foreign songs, foreign dress, foreign architecture, and foreign ceremonies. When people pass an Adventist church I do not want them to resist attending because everything appears foreign. If they are going to reject Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, I want them to do so because they do not want to commit their lives to Jesus and not because the way he is presented is so foreign.

Second, God is not just the God of Western people. He is the God of all peoples, in all countries, and in all cultures of the world. While it is true that there are common biblical beliefs that all Christians share, it is equally true that the Good News about Jesus Christ can be shared using the language and the local cultural forms of each people group. Unfortunately the Adventist Church is a North American dominated church. An illustration of this is that the *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, which is primarily written from a North American perspective. Many of the suggested formats for the various church ceremonies are very Western and very American.

I believe strongly that people should not have to take on Western names, use Western music forms, dress in Western clothes, get married in Western-style wedding ceremonies, or do other church things in Western ways. Critical contextualization provides an approach where local believers can be involved in developing local expressions of biblical Christianity. Western and foreign ways just create unnecessary barriers that prevent many from hearing the beautiful message of the gospel.

Those of us involved in world mission must be at the forefront to encourage local people to develop local expressions of their faith. When I hear people rejoice about the fact that regardless of where they travel in the world the Sabbath school and church service order of worship, the songs sung, and the way of doing church is the same, I do not rejoice, I groan. For that means that the foreign visitor is comfortable, but how about the local people? Are they comfortable with the often foreignness of Adventist worship? We can and must do better to allow local cultural expressions of biblical faith and practice.

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Bruce Bauer was the president of the Cambodia Adventist Mission from 1997 to 2001 during which time he was able to introduce concepts of critical contextualization to the newly established church in that country.

John Holbrook

Bulugo Vine Story: Redemptive Analogy Case Study

The withered grandma sat on the edge of the rough bench, straining to hear every word of the story that my father was telling. “This is not possible!” she thought to herself. “No outsider has ever known this legend, nor the details about the spirits which this white man talked about tonight. No one has ever cared enough, nor stayed long enough to learn these deep things. What can this mean?”

My father, a missionary with Adventist Frontier Missions (AFM), continued the story. “Remember how the ancestors told us that in the beginning, earth was connected by the *balugo* vine to the next world above us, the world called *Alitao*? Your ancestors used to go up and down the vine every day, visiting the Alitao people, and even communicating with God who lived in the topmost world.

“Then one day, as a father and daughter climbed up the vine, the father was filled with lust, and committed the first sin. As he did this terrible, terrible thing, the *balugo* vine broke off and fell into the ground. Ever since, you have been disconnected from God. The world has suffered as the spirits torture people and fill every waking moment with terror. Worst of all, God is now silent. You have no way to contact him, and he appears to have no interest in you anymore.”

The grandma bowed her head in grief. It was true. This white man knew. Her people, the Alangan, had brought all this suffering and fear on themselves. Worse, God had fallen silent, nevermore to communicate with his wayward children.

But the missionary was still speaking. “There is something which you don’t know, though. The spirits that came into the world after the first sin, after the *balugo* vine broke, they have deceived you. They told you that Satan was the weakest of all spirits. They taught you sorcery, and how to kill people through spirit birds and cats. Some of them claimed to be your dead ancestors. All of them brought fear and suffering. But the greatest

deception of all, was when they convinced you that God no longer cared about you, that he no longer wanted to communicate with you or help you.

"The reason that I came here and spent the years it has taken to learn your language and beliefs, was so that I could give you this message from God. He has not forgotten about you. He still wants to take care of you, just like your ancient name for God means, 'The One Who Takes Care of Us.' In fact, God sent his Son to earth to replace the broken *balugo* vine, in other words to replace the connection to God which our ancestors broke. God's Son, Jesus, is like a new *balugo* vine. God sent him to the Earth so that you can go back up to God's world and live forever without any fear or suffering, without any evil spirits to torture you. You can reconnect to God by believing in Jesus, and trusting in him."

The Alangan were silent. The little grandma continued to sit with her head bowed. "Could it be true?" she wondered, hope beginning to burn in her heart for the first time in decades. "This white man knows so much. He knows the old story. He knows about the spirits. He knows our language. He has demonstrated his love to us by staying so long, and by treating our sick. He must know the truth about God too. This Jesus must really be God's way to bring us back to His world."

"I want to go back to God's world!" the grandma said, standing up. "I believe this Jesus is God's son and that he can protect me from the spirits. Tell me what I must do."

Growing up working among the Alangan with my parents, as well as now on my own AFM project, I have had many first-hand experiences of contextualization. Some of the instances which I have witnessed worked quite well, while others actually caused harm. Generally, in my experience, the missionary needs to initially contextualize his or her own understanding of the plan of redemption in order to break through the established barriers of resistance. However, the people we work among should immediately be allowed, and even led, to discover God and the truths of the Bible from within their own context. Thus, after the initial acceptance of salvation, further contextualization becomes an inherent part of the process of discovering God as they learn from the Bible.

In the examples related in this article, it is important to understand that the use of the word, *contextualization*, does not imply that the missionary comes to the target people with his or her own culturally interpreted understanding of the Bible, and simply translates that into a message which the people in the local culture can understand. Rather, in this article, contextualization is intended to refer to the process which both the missionary and the new believers go through to discover how the unchanging principles of God's word apply in this new context.

The most dramatic use of contextualization that I have personally witnessed

was my father's use of the *balugo* vine story as a redemptive analogy. Catholic missionaries had attempted to convert the Alangan since the 1500s. Protestant missionaries had joined the effort in the 1950s. There had even been an Adventist church less than a kilometer away from the nearest Alangan village for thirty years before we arrived. Yet there was almost nothing to show for all of that effort.

My family was the third AFM missionary to the Alangan. After nearly three years of working among them, there was little more to show for our work than our predecessors. My father, however, was convicted that he must find a way to learn the deep spiritual beliefs and practices of the people. Up to that point, they had never opened up to anyone. No one had ever gained their trust sufficiently.

By faith the AFM team scheduled a series of meetings to address the spirits and the ancient beliefs. For weeks, my family and the rest of the team prayed for a breakthrough. Finally, just before the meetings were to start, a young man by the name of Ramon came to my father and volunteered to teach him. Night after night Ramon taught him the heart of the Alangan beliefs and practice in the spiritual world. It was Ramon who taught him of the *balugo* vine, and it was this story which God used to bridge the gulf between the Alangan worldview and the plan of redemption. That night, as my father retold the story of redemption, using the analogy of their legend, God started a revolution among the Alangan.

As the church began to rapidly grow, we found that God had uniquely prepared Ramon to lead the young believers. In fact, God had called Ramon through dreams and visions long before any of us had arrived in the Philippines.

One of Ramon's key contributions was his leadership as the church continued to wrestle out how to apply God's teachings in the Bible to the Alangan context. The AFM missionaries encouraged and gave council as Ramon and the other church leaders contextualized their new faith, but the decisions were largely theirs.

One example was the church buildings which they chose to build. When we first arrived, we began by holding church on our front porch. However, the believers soon wanted to build a building for God. The native church leaders feared that the Alangan would feel uncomfortable in a concrete and tin-roofed building like the lowland Filipino believers favored, so they chose to build with native materials. Over the years, as the Alangan have had increasing exposure to outsiders and lowland Filipinos, they have chosen to add a cement floor and tin roof to keep down maintenance costs. However, even today, they insist on keeping their bamboo walls so that any Alangan, from any walk of life, will feel comfortable coming to the house of God.

Another example of the Alangan church leaders' own contextualization was their dress. The leaders knew that lowland Christians dressed very formally for church, and expected them to do so as well. However, they knew that if new interests from deeper in the mountains came to church and saw everyone in clothes, they would feel uncomfortable in their loin-cloths. The leaders feared that these highland Alangan would not come to church, and would be turned away from God. They decided to seek the middle ground by wearing a shirt with a freshly laundered loincloth and bare feet. Over the years as the Alangan have become more accustomed to clothes, the church leaders have moved to wearing slacks. However, they continue to largely go to church barefoot. The Alangan church leaders' care has paid off. In the twenty-four years that I have worked with these people, I have never heard of an instance of architecture or dress causing offense or preventing an Alangan from coming to Christ.

Among the neighboring Tawbuid people, where I currently work, the native church leaders have also chosen to contextualize their dress for the sake of mission. In their home churches, where clothes have become normal, they dress quite formally. However, when they go on expeditions into the interior in search of individuals and villages open to the gospel, they adopt a more incarnational approach. Many times they dress only in small loincloths, just like the highlanders, and rub the soot from the bottom of a cooking pot over their skin. This helps them look more like the highlanders who sleep in the ashes and charcoal of their cooking fires. As these leaders trek through the mountains, highlanders often ask them why they go to such lengths since it is clear from the light color of their thighs that they are used to wearing clothes. This opens the door to conversations with the highland Tawbuid who are usually so closed to outsiders that they refuse to talk.

As mentioned above, one area in which the missionaries on our projects have often taken the initiative in contextualization has been at the point of conversion. Western Christianity has largely seen sin as the foundational human problem, Satan as the instigator of sin and all evil, and Christ's forgiveness and redemption as the solution, the point at which a person is saved.

However, for the animistic Alangan, sin is a non-issue. Their culture only recognizes four sins: murder, adultery, stealing, and inappropriate anger. If a person can avoid these sins, as several people have been known to do since infancy, they are perfect in the culture's eyes. Even if a person sins, however, it has no impact on their ultimate destiny. Each organ of the body is believed to have a spirit, and each of those spirits go to different places upon death, whether or not the person sins.

The Alanagan also knew of Satan before any missionaries came. In

their understanding, however, he was the weakest of all the spirits, simply sitting on people's shoulders whispering temptations, while the other spirits truly wield power and regularly tortured them.

My family, just like every missionary who came before us, began by teaching the people about sin, Satan's temptations, and Jesus' gracious forgiveness of our sins. The Alangan recognized each of these terms. They nodded their heads in agreement as we taught. But, in fact, they were interpreting them far differently from what we meant. They agreed with our teaching, according to their interpretation of it, but sin simply was not an issue they were concerned with. Sickness, fear, and demonic activity were what consumed their lives and what they felt the need of redemption from.

It was in the same series of meetings mentioned above where my family finally understood this, and switched from approaching redemption as forgiveness of sins to redemption as freedom from the spirits. Once the Alangan grasped this with joy and relief, once they met Jesus for themselves as he freed them from their slavery to the demons and reconnected them to their long-lost Father God, then sin started to matter to them. Once they met Christ as he saved them from terror, they fell in love with him and wanted to please him. It was in redemption from the fear of the spirits that the Alangan first found salvation, not in redemption from guilt.

Not all of our experiences of contextualization turned out well, however. It is interesting to note that most of the cases in which contextualization went awry were instances when the missionaries initiated it. Not all of the missionaries' attempts were harmful, however a higher proportion of their endeavors backfired. This does not mean that missionaries should not participate in the discovery/contextualization process. The missionary often has a broad spectrum of experiences and information, and can prove to be a fertile source of ideas for the indigenous church leaders to draw on. However, this observation does indicate a need for a genuine respect for, and openness to, the local believers' own assessments of how best to apply biblical teaching as the Holy Spirit actively leads them.

Both the Alangan and the Tawbuid tribes are very musical. In fact, at one point, the Tawbuid language was sung, not spoken. Certain areas of the highlands continue this practice to this day. However, their music is far, far different from ours. In time, we realized that their musical system is so different from Western music that a well-trained Alangan musician (most are) will never be able to fully grasp the Western system or vice versa. The systems appear to be mutually exclusive.

Wanting to allow the church to grow up with indigenous musical expressions of praise to God, we talked to several of the most accomplished Alangan musicians, asking them to sing Alangan songs in church on

Sabbath. They did, and for more than a year we heard at least one Alangan song each Sabbath.

In time, however, it became clear that some people were becoming uncomfortable. Finally, the native church leaders came to us and asked us to stop encouraging the members to sing Alangan songs to God. Astonished, my parents politely asked the reason. "You see," they explained. "We have many kinds of songs. We tell our history through one kind, we tell stories through another. We make up poetic songs on the fly to comfort our crying babies or to woo lovers. However, every type of song which we use in a spiritual way, always is used to contact the spirits which we now realize are Satan's demons. Even though we speak to God when we sing Alangan songs in church, nevertheless since it is a spiritual context our minds and hearts automatically feel like we are calling the demons. It brings an attitude and spirit into church which is not of Christ."

Another issue arose several years later when a number of volunteers, who believed very strongly in herbal medicine, came to work with us. Now, please understand that I am not against herbal medicines when they are used correctly. However, when working cross culturally, it is important to be cautious since, to the local people, many objects and practices have meanings which are very different from what they mean to us.

Several months into the volunteers' term, the leaders of all of the Alangan churches gathered together and came to my parents. Very carefully and politely, they informed my parents that the volunteers were teaching the Alangan believers to return to witchcraft and demonic power.

Astonished, my parents asked how that could possibly be. "You see, it's like this," the leaders replied. "Since ancient times we have known that certain trees and plants have inherent healing properties. Many others, however, only heal when they are gathered with, or used with, incantations to the spirits. The volunteers that you have brought here first asked our people to teach them all of the plants which we used to use as medicine. Now they are insisting that the believers use *all* of these plants, even the ones which only have power from the demons."

The volunteers had been well intentioned. Indeed, they had done an honorable thing by first learning the people's own medicinal plants, and then teaching their use rather than handing out expensive and unsustainable medical care imported from far away. However, their attempt at contextualizing their health ministry failed, and even caused harm to the church, because they did not consult the local church leaders before implementing their contextualization.

There has been discussion, in recent years, as to the role of contextualization in missions. Daniel Shaw posits that contextualization implies the missionary coming to the local people group with a body of

knowledge, and seeking techniques to communicate this knowledge in a way which is understandable in the local context. Shaw indicates that rather than contextualizing the missionary's perception of Christianity to make it understandable within the local people's culture, the missionary should facilitate the people themselves discovering God from within their own cultural context (2010:208-214)

In my own mission experience, I have found this approach to be valid and preferable, once there are local believers, and as God begins to develop leaders from among them. At times, cultural dynamics or God's preparation of an unreached people group allow them to discover God without a great deal of intervention on the missionary's part. However, in the beginning stages, it is often unavoidable that the missionary must make his or her own best attempt at contextualizing the message of God's desire and provision to save the people. Once the initial resistance has been removed and the local people have come to a measure of faith and desire to learn, then the missionary can move to the role of guiding and supporting the Spirit-led believers as they themselves discover what God's Word teaches, and what his truths look like lived out in their own context.

Used in these ways, contextualization will prove a great blessing and a powerful tool to reach the unreached with the Good News. Indeed, effective contextualization is often the key which the Holy Spirit uses to unlock a movement among unreached peoples.

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John Holbrook grew up church planting with his family among the Alangan of the Philippines. In 2011, he returned to the Philippines with Adventist Frontier Missions to church plant among the unreached Tawbuid.

J. L. Samir

Jewelry in Hinduism: A Mission Challenge

Disclaimer

This paper does not replace or intend to promote an alternate position concerning the wearing of jewelry in the Seventh-day Adventists Church. Rather, the recommendations and research are the expressed ideas and position of the author and indicate an attempt to deal with cultural issues that are real and challenging among Hindu converts to Seventh-day Adventism.

Description of the Issue

Hindus are an unreached people group, one that has resisted the gospel for many reasons. Hindus perceive the Adventist Church as primarily a Western institution and based on a culture and ideology considered to be a threat to their South Asian worldview. This association is not entirely inaccurate. The Adventist Church was birthed in the United States, and Western ideals are embedded in the foundational principles of its operation. For example, the Adventist Church governance structure mirrors elements of the American representative system of government.

It is impossible to divorce ourselves from the influence of culture. When Adventists with a Western worldview minister within an Eastern context, they bring with them biblical teachings along with Western cultural ideals. This is not an issue until they impose on their audience Western practices that are antithetical to a people group shaped by a different set of values (Richards and O'Brien 2012:35). In the West, Adventists are taught that people who wear jewelry elevate worldly practices over the Bible (Wheeler 1989:10). In Eastern contexts, the wearing of jewelry represents one's status in society. A married woman puts on certain jewelry when she marries and is expected to wear it until her husband dies (Shukla 2008:309).

The issue of adornment and jewelry is a point of contention between Western and Eastern Christians. When Hindus accept Jesus Christ, they are expected to dispose of all adornment and jewelry before becoming members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. To Hindus, this is one of the confirmations that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is an agent of Western culture trying to replace their Eastern values and way of life. The Adventist position on adornment and jewelry is a challenge to many Hindus because of the different cultural ideals and meanings behind adornment within the South Asian context.

Definition of Adornment and Jewelry

A definition of adornment is needed, but caution must be taken because any one definition may not adequately address the issue in every context or culture. The *Collins Dictionary* defines adornment as “something that is used to make a person or thing more beautiful or is the process of making something more beautiful by adding something to it.” The above definition implies that adornment is anything that a person uses to enhance and improve beauty. Jewelry is defined in the *Oxford Dictionary* as “personal ornaments, such as necklaces, rings, or bracelets that are typically made from or contain jewels and precious metal.”

It is helpful at this juncture to define jewelry from an Adventist perspective. Angel Rodriguez in his book *Jewelry in the Bible*, defines jewelry as “ornaments made of different materials with different functions that can be placed directly on the body or on the garments of a person in order to enhance the appearance of the individual, establish social distinctions, and communicate personal convictions” (1999:8).

Adornment among Hindus

South Asians are recognized for their historical interest in adornment art, which contributes to their identity as a people group, particularly in the nation of India. Visitors are intrigued by the aesthetic beauty of India, both ancient and modern, which is dated as one of the oldest civilizations in the world (Janannathan 2018). India is the birthplace of Hinduism, which has no founder and no single set of beliefs (Klostermaier 2007:1). To understand the meaning of adornment to Hindus, it is necessary to survey its meaning in the religious setting, everyday life, and traditions. Hindus employ cultural adornment in a vast variety of forms. Yet, South Asian society is able to distinguish the subtle differences in adornment that differentiate between religious affiliation, caste, status, and even economic standing (Shukla 2008:5).

The Hindi language contains more than seventy words for how a person might adorn themselves with ornaments (Bhushan 1979:48, 49). *Shringar* and *suhag* are Hindi terms with Sanskrit roots that describe adornment. *Shringar* implies beauty and love in the sense of romance, while *suhag* means husband and *suhagee* refers to a married woman who is blessed to have a husband who is alive so that she might adorn herself (Shukla 2008:3, 4). *Suhag* is also referred to as a sign of marriage, an agreement between a newly married woman and her husband in which she will wear the marriage ornament as a symbol of her status until she becomes a widow. Applying red dye to the center part of her hair or wearing a toe ring or a marriage chain around her neck are all signs to family and community that she will remain faithful to her marriage vows (Leslie 1995:96).

Adornment of a South Asian woman begins in her childhood and ends when she becomes a widow. After the birth of a girl, her parents begin preparing her for marriage when she will leave their home and move in with her husband's family. The steps for marriage preparation vary from family to family and society to society. In most cases, the young girl is not aware of or does not have a choice regarding the adornments prepared for her. When a woman is married, she adopts a very prescribed form of adornment that is mandated for a married woman by her society.

In general, it is accepted that women adorn themselves more than men. This is true for the Indian subcontinent and the diaspora, primarily because of the expectations placed on women to adorn themselves in very prescribed ways (Shukla 2008:6). In contrast, men in modern times wear Western clothes and are given no prescription or limitation on adornment, with the exception of priests (Gayen 2018).

The rapid change of culture and the exposure of women to the outside world through education and travel have given Hindu women a voice regarding the demands of their society when it comes to adornment. Researchers are noticing a shift from rigid cultural demands to giving women some limited personal choice when it comes to adornment within the urban context; however, in the villages, women are still expected to honor the cultural expectation of adornment, regardless of their individual preferences or desires.

Adornment in Hindu Marriages

Marriage is the most important rite of passage for a Hindu woman and it is the climax of her adornment journey. In modern Indian cities, a married Hindu woman could wear any one or all four of the symbols of marriage recognized in India: the *sindur* (a red dot on her forehead), marriage chain, bangle, or toe ring (Nag 2018). However, in many parts of India, the

specific symbol is required based on ethnic group. For example, in southern India, married women generally wear the marriage chain, known as a *tali* (Shukla 2008:22). At a typical wedding, a woman will have 16 adornments made of pure gold or the finest artwork (History of Indian Jewellery n.d.).

Hindu brides, both past and present, typically move to the home of the husband's parents to begin married life (Shukla 2008:23). Most newly married women's wealth is contained in the bridal jewelry that they receive upon marriage (Shukla 2008:144, 145). Beginning with the marriage ceremony and continuing for the next few months, community members will visit the bride in her new home and present her with gifts. This ritual is called *muhdikhai*, meaning "to see the face of the newly married woman" (Kapur 2009:224). When these visitors from the community see the bride wearing the 16 adornments, her parents are honored, as people recognize that the bride came to her new home with wealth (Cultural India n.d.).

When the wedding and honeymoon are over and a baby enters the home, the expectation of adorning with the full regalia of marriage is lowered. Many women settle for only the essentials, and even imitations made of plastic are worn in the interest of security and preservation of the precious ornaments from their weddings (Shukla 2008:25).

Adornment in Public Spaces

Visual imagery in the South Asian culture is one of the primary modes of communication, especially in religious and social settings (Shukla 2008:35). Glassie observed that it takes superior skill to read an image and understand its message (2002:218). For example, the face of a deity is the most important visual element for a devotee. This is known as *darshan*, which is defined as "a visual exchange between a worshiper and a *murti*" (Shukla 2008:26).

The bride's face is also an important visual element. During the wedding ceremony, only the bride's face is visible to guests. According to South Asian traditions, the face of a woman is one of the ways beauty or sacredness is revealed (29-32). Shukla notes that some young women adorn themselves with garments, such as a sari or shalwar; however, they communicate with their faces and eyes. This is where many use certain jewelry and makeup to draw attention to themselves (47, 48). Shukla observes that women are compared to a deity's wife (such as Ram's wife, Sita) and husbands are compared to Ram, a male deity. In the Hindu worldview, it is expected that a married woman be perfect in behavior, temperament, and appearance while men are expected to be perfect only in temperament and to be physically strong (32). South Asian women argue they are treated as ornaments by their husbands or family (84).

In India, it is expected that a Hindu will dress differently from a Muslim although there are important similarities. The difference is noted in very distinct styles and colors of garments. Shukla (2008) notes that religious affiliation is an important distinction among South Asians in India. However, both Muslims and Hindus wear similar jewelry to identify their status in society. For instance, Muslim married women wear the same chain as Hindu women. The wearing of marriage symbols in South Asia transcends religious affiliation.

Shukla also notes that South Asians are expected to follow the cultural norms of adornment. For example, unmarried and married women are expected to adorn themselves with the proper symbols that represent their status. On the other hand, a woman may decide to draw notice to herself by using adornments outside the norm of the Indian culture and thus gain unusual attention that could be either positive or negative (2008:50). It is generally accepted in Indian contexts that individuals who excessively adorn themselves may do so with a goal of compensating for something that is missing, such as a lack of education or some other perceived inferiority (55). This observation has some merit but is difficult for an outsider to determine.

Summary

India is a patriarchal society strongly influenced by customs, religious affiliations, and socioeconomic patterns (Ahmed-Ghosh 2004:94). The subject of adornment among South Asians, especially Hindus, is a complex issue that demands extensive research. Adornment among women is more prescribed than among men. Adornment to a Hindu is not a fashion statement but a way of life that guides them from one stage of life to another or from situation to situation. These life events are essential for passing on the South Asian way of life to the next generation.

Biblical Perspective on Adornment and Jewelry

The Bible is the guide for the Christian faith, and thus, it is relevant to seek counsel from the Word of God on the subject of adornment. In the Bible, adornment is influenced by culture (McCracken 1986:78). Scholars agree that jewelry was part of adornment for both men and women in the biblical narrative (Exod 35:22; Judg 8:24, 25; Prov 25:12; 1 Pet 3:4). The usage of jewelry as part of adornment seems to be the norm rather than the exception (Braun 1996:18).

Both the Old and New Testaments describe many ways people in the Bible adorned themselves and how jewelry was used in ancient times. It

was used as personal adornment (Ezek 23:40; 1 Pet 3:4; Rodriguez 1999:22, 44) and also as currency (Gen 24:22; Acts 3:6; Rodriguez 1999:23, 46). It was a form of wealth accumulation (Gen 24:35), especially in marriage where the bride was given her wealth to take with her to the husband's home (Isa 49:18; Rev 18:16; Rodriguez 1999:25, 46). In general, the bride was expected to display her wealth on both the day of the wedding and beyond (Rodriguez 1999:26). Jewelry was also a symbol of social status, used, for example, by kings, priests, and women on the day of their marriage (Rodriguez 1999:27, 47). This is noted as the most common use of jewelry in the Bible (2 Sam 1:10; Jas 2:2). Jewelry was also used as a symbol of power or authority (Gen 41:42; Luke 15:22; Rodriguez 1999:27, 48). Finally, jewelry appeared to be used in religious functions (Exod 28:36–38; 2 Kgs 11:12; Rodriguez 1999:34), as an offering (Num 31:50; Matt 2:11), and in magic and evil practices (Isa 3:20; Rodriguez 1999:25).

Angel Rodriguez, a recognized Adventist theologian and former director of the Biblical Research Institute of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, wrote a comprehensive book entitled *Jewelry in the Bible*. He states that as a Seventh-day Adventist, he accepts the Church's position on jewelry. However, his, "main interest is to examine all the relevant biblical materials in order to determine whether the standard is biblical or not, or whether it needs adjustment" (1999:8). He observes that the Old Testament promotes a "restrictive attitude" towards jewelry. For example, the High Priest was authorized to wear decorative jewelry (42). Rodriguez notes that the New Testament also promotes a "restrictive usage" of jewelry, similar to the Old Testament. He concludes that the New Testament rejects the usage of jewelry for "personal ornamentation" (50).

According to Rodriguez, jewelry was used in the Bible in many different ways, ranging from a symbol of authority to a symbol of beauty. He notes that jewelry itself is not evil but rather how it is used (92). His argument is that the Bible supports the usage of jewelry for functional purposes but not as "personal adornment" (93). Roy Adam's review of Rodriguez's book, *Jewelry in the Bible*, notes many good points but claims that the book does not address the practical issues of wearing jewelry in non-Western cultures (2000:1). He asks, "Is the argument watertight?" (2). According to Adams, Rodriguez' biblical study reveals that God does not completely condemn or support the usage of jewelry (3).

Dennis Braun's study of the biblical texts on the issue of jewelry arrived at a different conclusion than that of Rodriguez. Braun concludes that the "Israelites practiced the free use of jewelry and adornment in all its varied forms," and he does not see any biblical evidence that the wearing of jewelry is forbidden or limited in the Bible (1996:10). He notes that God counseled the Israelites on many occasions about the misuse of jewelry. He refers to Elizabeth Platt's research on Isaiah 3:16-24 which,

according to Braun, is the passage used by many Adventists as proof that God condemns the use of jewelry. Platt's research suggests a new way of understanding this passage. She states that Isaiah 3:16-24 is about God sending a strong message of warning to both male and female aristocrats who are taking advantage of the poor. This passage describes 21 items used for adornment, including jewelry, apparel, and cosmetics (1979:83, 84). According to Platt, this is a new and more accurate interpretation of the biblical text because 16 of the 21 articles are used solely by men in high office, and the additional six items could be used by women.

In Exod 28:2, *tiph'eret* is a noun and is translated as "beauty." The meaning of *tiph'eret* in Exod 28:2 and 28:40 implies that clothing or a turban is included to make something beautiful. Hamilton describes a turban as a general garment that is worn by both men and women in the Middle Near Eastern context (1980:2:714). This means that adornment includes garments and jewelry, and these should not be separated in the biblical interpretation of adornment (714). The biblical meaning in the context of the Middle Near Eastern understanding suggests that the act of putting on clothes and ornaments, not merely jewelry, is what determines beauty.

Principles of Adornment in the Bible

Biblical scholars agree that jewelry was part of the everyday life of people in the Bible as pointed out above, and was used for power and authority, marriage, and personal beauty. However, God intervened when adornment or the usage of jewelry became a problem in society—either as an interference to worship or a misuse of wealth.

In Genesis, God instructed Jacob and his household to take off their jewelry (Gen 35:4). The biblical narrative indicates that God called Jacob and his household to go and worship at a specific place known as Bethel. He required Jacob and his household to prepare themselves before going to Bethel. This preparation included getting rid of foreign gods and earrings (Gen 35:1-4). Scholars are divided as to whether this instruction from God means that Israelites were required to stop wearing jewelry or God was particularly interested in their heart transformation and did not want the Israelites to come to him with jewelry that represented another god. One conclusion that could be drawn from the biblical narrative is that God was more concerned about purity and removing objects that interfered with his people's communion with him. God was also teaching his people that jewelry and adornment should not take his place. The Bible suggests that jewelry itself is not evil, but how jewelry is used is the concern expressed by God in Scripture (Rodriguez 1999:92).

God also addressed the issue of jewelry as a misuse of economic blessings He bestowed upon his people. In Isaiah 3:18, 19, God challenges the status quo of the period. He says that men and women who take advantage of the poor will pay a high price if they do not stop. They were dressed in the finest apparel and jewelry and appeared to be honest and caring people, but inside they were selfish and greedy. Throughout the biblical narrative there are two situations in which God directly confronts his people—first, when the Israelites worship idols (Ezek 14:4; 2 Kgs 17:12; Hos 4:12) and second, when they take advantage of the poor (Zech 7:10; Prov 22:22, 23; Amos 2:6; Isa 10:1-3). The second reason mentioned above is important because God pronounced judgment on wealthy evildoers who displayed their jewelry at the expense of the weak and less fortunate. This act of God is consistent with Rodriguez's findings that jewelry by itself is not evil but the motive behind it is what leads to evil (1999:90).

The Bible presents the principle of transformation taking place from inside rather than from the outside. Jesus challenges a longstanding Jewish tradition that teaches that cleaning the outside of the body is what makes a person pure. Jesus teaches that transformation occurs internally (Matt 15:11). The outward behavior may or may not indicate that change has taken place in a person.

At times, the use of jewelry is actually affirmed in the Bible. In Ezekiel 17:9-14, God describes his plan to adorn his children. The description resembles a wedding ceremony in which God wants to take Israel as his bride. The picture painted is not easily understood without an exploration of the cultural context. Weddings in the Near East are similar to those in India. On the wedding day, the bride is adorned with the finest apparel and jewelry available to her. The reason is that she will leave her father's home and go to the family home of her husband. This tradition was recorded in the biblical story of Rebekah leaving her home and being given a dowry and jewelry to take with her (Gen 24:53). This tradition teaches that a father's gift to his daughter is her departing gift to help her survive in her new life with her husband and his household. God used the cultural norms, such as bridal adornment, to teach us about his love and expectations for Christians.

The Adventist Position on Jewelry

The Seventh-day Adventist position on jewelry and adornment, as stated in the Church's Fundamental Beliefs and *Church Manual*, is influenced by the writings of Ellen White, who is one of the founders of the denomination. According to Seventh-day Adventists, their position on adornment and jewelry is biblically based.

In the current 28 Fundamental Beliefs document, the 22nd doctrinal statement, titled “Christian Behavior,” states that Adventists “should meet the highest standards of Christian taste and beauty,” and “while recognizing culture differences, our dress is to be simple, modest and neat. . . . True beauty does not consist of outward adornment but in the imperishable ornament of a gentle and quiet spirit” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2015a:9). The document does not explicitly use the word jewelry but appears to include the usage of jewelry when it mentions outward adornment. The biblical references listed are limited to the New Testament (1 Pet 3:1–4; 1 Tim 2:9), and the omission of Old Testament passages without explanation is surprising (Gen 35:4; Exod 32:2; Isa 3:18–23).

The *Church Manual* is the governance document of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It provides leadership, policies, and guidance for the local church and addresses matters of discipline. The *Church Manual* includes the exact statement on adornment as found in the 28 Fundamental Beliefs; however, it also has a section titled “Dress” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2015b:146). This section summarizes the counsels from Ellen White on dress, adornment, and jewelry. It states that Seventh-day Adventist Christians are called out from the world and must be influenced only by their religion. It emphasizes that “customs and fashions change, but principles of right conduct must remain the same” (147). It maintains that White’s statements on dress, adornment, and jewelry are “to protect the people of God from the corrupting influence of the world” (1904:4:634). White states that dress should be about service, not beauty, and should be modest and of good quality. She emphasizes that members should not wear jewelry or ornament (1904:3:366).

The *Church Manual* adds that the wearing of jewelry “is contrary to the will of God” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2015b:147). It equates the wearing of ornaments or jewelry to a promotion of self instead of a promotion of Christian values. The *Church Manual* notes that some countries and cultures require their people, regardless of their religion, to wear the wedding ring as a symbol of marriage, and thus, it is “not regarded as an ornament,” and the Adventist Church does “not condemn the practice” (147). The *Church Manual* appears to promote modesty and simplicity in adornment and forbids the use of jewelry as display. It affirms the biblical teachings of inward beauty over outward beauty, for this is in keeping with the will of God and the beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

In the 21st century, young Adventists from different cultures have contrasting views on the practice of jewelry. For example, I once attended a university board meeting in North America in which an Adventist

university student had been invited to share the devotion. She shared her spiritual journey as a child whose father diligently sought to instill in her the values taught in the Bible. She grappled with these beliefs and eventually embraced all the teachings of Jesus Christ, and today she is a spiritual leader on campus. She is the head of campus ministries that focus on student spiritual development. Surprisingly, she had two studs in each ear. Ten years ago, it was customary to see other devout Protestants with earrings, but today it is our Adventist young people wearing the earrings. It would not be Christ-like for me to judge her walk with Jesus solely on the fact that she wore earrings.

Ellen G. White and Jewelry

There is no doubt that Ellen G. White wrote and counseled the Seventh-day Adventist Church on the subject of adornment and jewelry. The Church heeded her counsel and adopted her statements into the *Fundamental Beliefs* in 1972. However, from 1932 to 1942, when the first *Church Manual* was published, none of White's counsels or statements were included except a statement against the usage of gold ornaments. The position and wording changed in the 1951 *Church Manual*, which included White's statements on adornment and jewelry, along with biblical references.

Braun's study on the history of jewelry and adornment details how Seventh-day Adventists and White's positions evolved over time and how the counsel given was not always followed (1996:32, 33). There are many evidences that the official position of the Church was not practiced by many of its members. For example, members of the Battle Creek church made a resolution on dress reform on April 30, 1866, that was also adopted by the Seventh-day Adventist governing body that same year. This reform included giving up gold watches, gold chains, gold rings, gold bracelets, gold sleeve-buttons, diamond studs, and pins (Land 1989:46, 47). Braun notes that White in her writings addressed the issue of adornment in a more comprehensive manner than official church documents such as the *Church Manual* and *Fundamental Beliefs* (40).

Braun argues that White's position on jewelry was influenced by her Methodist background which promoted simplicity, including the elimination of jewelry (36). White noted that her former denomination struggled to maintain the prohibition against jewelry. She witnessed that a "lady was baptized with her gold rings, earrings and a bonnet" (1952:123). Braun observes that White's counsels on jewelry and adornment are based on two important issues: (1) the urgency of the second coming of Jesus and (2) living one's personal life as though Jesus' second coming were imminent (37). He also notes that White spoke out against the middle class and their

spending habits, not only on adornment and jewelry but also on other excesses. White wrote in a letter dated September 28, 1896, "Those who invest the Lord's goods in expensive buildings, in extravagant adornment, in furniture, in dress, in needless ornament of show or display are embezzling our Lord's goods that are only lent us for a time" (257).

The *Church Manual* succinctly quotes White's statement in her third volume of *Testimonies for the Church* in its official denominational position: "To dress plainly, abstaining from display of jewelry and ornaments of every kind, is in keeping with our faith" (1904:3:366). This volume was written during a time when the fledgling Adventist Church had a presence only in the United States, mainly in the central and northeastern states. An examination of the purpose and audience of the preceding statement on jewelry indicates that White was addressing women and young people who were being influenced by a worldly culture and who were losing their first love for Jesus Christ. Her admonition was not only against adorning with jewelry for display but also against dress, amusements, or anything that might take the place of Jesus Christ (366).

To better understand the principle taught by White on the wearing of jewelry, it is necessary to compare the author's life with her teachings. Wheeler's research suggests that White herself wore pins and brooches, and family photos indicate that her "granddaughter wore a long metal chain around her neck" (1989:10). In one photo, White herself can be seen wearing a "a straight dress of black with nothing to break the somberness, save a tiny white collar about her neck and a heavy metallic chain which hung suspended near her waist" ("A Female Oracle" 1888).

The Adventist Church's position on adornment and jewelry as taken from White's counsel reveals the context and rationale for its position. Wheeler argues that White's counsel on adornment and jewelry was a reaction to middle-class America. Her personal life reveals she did not have a problem with basic adornment such as pins, brooches, necklaces made of shells, and silk cloth (1989:10). It is important to note that White did not contradict herself or present a double standard on the issue of adornment and jewelry. Her position, according to Braun, is that one's use of jewelry and adornment should fit within the broader picture of an Adventist Christian lifestyle of simplicity (Wheeler 1989:44).

The Adventist Church's position on modesty and simplicity is in keeping with the biblical mandate for followers of Jesus Christ. White emphasizes the importance for both ministers and church members to live a simple life and spoke out against Adventists living with an extravagant lifestyle. According to White, in a letter dated September 28, 1896, Adventists ought to practice simplicity and use the money given to them by God for saving souls instead of spending it on outward adornment such

as costly apparel and jewelry. These instructions are as relevant today as in her time.

At the same time, when giving counsel on the use of jewelry, White took the overall mission of the Church into consideration. In 1895, White wrote a letter concerning Ethel May Lacy, who was about to marry her son, Willie White, in Australia. According to the letter, Ellen White gave permission to Lacy to wear a wedding ring since it was the custom of British women to do so. Lacy stated that if she did not wear a wedding ring in the colony, many would assume that she was unmarried and living with Willie as a mistress, which would damage their and the Church's reputation in the colony.

The personal account of Ellen White allowing her daughter-law to wear a wedding ring made of gold was the first recorded exception approved by the co-founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Her position on American Adventists wearing any jewelry had not changed because in August 3, 1892, she wrote that ministers' wives serving at home or in the mission field should not feel required to wear a wedding ring except in those cultures that stipulate that they wear a ring as a symbol of marriage (White 1895:6).

White's decision to allow her daughter-in-law to wear a wedding ring suggests that she weighed two risks. On the one hand, there was the danger of church members seeing this as license to begin wearing all types of jewelry. But there was also the real danger of those outside the Church concluding that Adventists had a low view of marriage. The following factors could be drawn from White's letter: (1) the risk of Ethel and Willie being labeled as having a relationship outside of marriage, (2) the risk of the fledging Church being falsely accused of immoral lifestyles, (3) and the shame of Ethel's father, a strict vegetarian who lived in India, if his daughter would not wear a ring, which was the socially accepted symbol of marriage.

The experience of Ellen White and her position on the wearing of jewelry provides some guidance for the South Asian context. Her support for wearing jewelry as a symbol of marriage is a good example for understanding the principles behind the wearing of jewelry in the South Asian context.

Missiological Considerations

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has its presence in 213 out of the 216 countries recognized by the United Nations. This indicates that the Adventist Church has heeded the command from Jesus Christ to take the gospel to the world and is now a very diverse community of believers.

This achievement has brought many unexpected challenges, including a clash of cultures and ideologies. Therefore, it is necessary to evaluate how the Adventist Church presents its teachings and the application of its doctrines in diverse cultures, such as the South Asian context. The issue of jewelry and adornment among South Asians needs to be reexamined from a missiological perspective. This section seeks to discuss that challenge.

Historically, the Adventist position on adornment centered around modesty and simplicity; however, in the 21st century, it is more difficult to define because of the multiplicity of cultures that make up the Adventist Church. Concerning the issue of jewelry, the Adventist Church clearly defined its position in its statement of Fundamental Beliefs. No jewelry is allowed, with the exception of wedding rings in cultures that require such. The Fundamental Belief is against jewelry worn as decoration, beauty, or as an ornament, but not items worn for functional purposes, such as a brooch or tiepin. Any jewelry used should be worn in harmony with Christian principles (North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists 1986:86). A brief survey of biblical texts on the issue of jewelry suggests that the Adventist Church's position on jewelry is influenced more by the Victorian culture of the 19th century than the biblical narrative, as outlined above.

The inconsistency in the renunciation of jewelry as a prerequisite for baptism and membership in the Adventist Church, the Western cultural understanding of adornment and jewelry, the biblical interpretation, and the meaning and usage of jewelry in the South Asian context are important issues that should be addressed as the Adventist Church engages Hindus with the gospel. This examination is not intended to determine a new position for the Seventh-day Adventist Church but rather to evaluate the impact and misunderstanding of jewelry within the South Asian context, especially for Hindus who accept Jesus Christ and their responsibility to be a witness to family and community.

How do Adventists respond in the South Asian context where jewelry and adornment have different meanings and application? For example, a South Asian woman does not get to choose whether she will or will not wear her marriage adornment. These symbols are a requirement of her family of origin, the family she is marrying into, and her community. This jewelry symbolizes both marriage and her status in society, exactly like the wedding ring within the Western cultural context.

Missiological Issues

Trouble comes when Hindus accept Jesus Christ and are preparing for baptism. They are told that they must take off their jewelry in order to be

saved and become a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The argument is that items of gold such as chains, bangles, nose rings, and toe rings are a violation of God's requirements and must be removed in order to follow Christ. Many South Asians are caught in a difficult situation in which they are expected to choose between pleasing God according to the rules of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and meeting the social and moral expectations of their family and community. Married women in South Asia are expected to wear three symbols of marriage until they become a widow. The Adventist Church policy treats South Asian marriage symbols as jewelry and requires their removal. This is based on the Church's pronouncement that the only approved jewelry is the wedding band. For Hindu women, the three symbols of marriage are their equivalent of the wedding band: the chain, nose ring, and toe ring, along with red dye painted as a dot on the forehead or applied along the center part of a woman's hair.

This expectation for the removal of jewelry has consequences for newly baptized members who are burdened with cultural expectations from a foreign land. As noted above, South Asian married women are only allowed to take off their wedding symbols when their husbands die. Unfortunately, many church leaders are making Hindu women widows before the death of their husbands. This social upheaval creates many challenges for the married woman coming to Christ as well as for her family and community.

In India, the status of widowhood occurs when a married woman loses her husband by death. Even though many of the older traditions of widowhood are no longer practiced among Hindus, social obligation requires widows to dress in a very specific way that communicates their status. A widow is still expected to remove all the marriage symbols and begin wearing a white sari. White in Hinduism is symbolic. For a widow, white indicates mourning, post-reproductive status, and the end of life with a husband (Lamb 2000:164). Widowhood in Hindu society is classified as the last stage of a woman's life. This period is marked with mourning and eating non-vegetarian food (Lamb 2000:175). Shukla notes from her study of widows in Varanasi that widows see themselves as partially dead because they have lost part of their lives, or their reason for living is no longer there (2008:321). Shukla observes it is socially unacceptable for a widow to act as though she is still married or for a married woman to visually suggest that she is a widow (316). The question remains, how does the Seventh-day Adventist Church address the issue of social upheaval caused by requiring South Asian married women to adopt the status of widows when their husbands are still alive?

As leaders in God's church, how do we deal appropriately with cultures that use symbols of marriage other than the wedding ring, a marriage symbol sanctioned in the *Church Manual*, such as a chain around the neck, toe ring, or nose ring? This issue can be divisive because historically, one culture in Adventism makes the decisions for all cultures. This paper is not intended to debate that issue but is simply seeking to answer the questions many Hindus are asking. Can Jesus Christ save them while wearing the marriage symbols of their culture? The most logical question to ask Westerners is *Can Jesus save a Westerner who wears a wedding ring?* It is a nonissue when considering it from this perspective. Jesus Christ did not list the removal of wedding rings or chains or nose rings or toe rings as a prerequisite for salvation.

An additional missiological issue related to the Adventist position on adornment can be noted in Ellen White's discussion of jewelry and adornment, mainly from the perspective of extravagance and wasting resources that could be used for meaningful ministry, such as helping the poor. This position is consistent with the biblical position on jewelry. God pronounces judgment on those who take advantage of the poor, and he warns them that they will lose their wealth of gold and precious gems. Today, many leaders condemn the wearing of South Asian marriage symbols or any other ornaments that are functional while these same leaders wear expensive watches, ties, and clothing. This reveals a troubling inconsistency in dealing with jewelry and adornment. The value of the items that Adventists condemn does not equal the value of Western functional jewelry.

Ultimately, the work of mission must be based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. Transformation begins from the inside out and not the outside in. This principle is not always practiced by Adventist pastors and leaders. It is easier for Adventists to focus on the externals as a sign of the condition of a believer's heart. The important principle is to allow people to grow in Christ and an understanding of the value and implications of jewelry within their cultural context.

Recommendations for the South Asian Context

The missiological issues explored above are helpful for formulating guidelines that will empower Adventists who are working among the 1.2 billion South Asians or 13 percent of the world's population. These front-line workers labor to expand the kingdom of God in places where the gospel is resisted by people due to cultural issues such as adornment and jewelry. The following are some steps that will assist church planters and leaders working among South Asians.

The first step is for church planters and mission leaders to research and understand the meaning and usage of jewelry for the South Asian who is coming to Jesus Christ. Ellen White's counsel on wedding rings is helpful. She states, "Let them wear it if they can do so conscientiously." She was addressing the European context where the wedding ring was a social and moral obligation (1923:181). Careful study should be given on how to apply this principle to the South Asian context.

Additionally, South Asians coming to Jesus Christ should be offered instruction on how jewelry has been viewed in the Western Adventist Church. This helps to inform leaders and new members and potential members on the teachings against the usage of jewelry and puts the discussion in perspective as it relates to an Adventist identity. Not wearing jewelry has been a way of identifying Adventists from non-Adventists. It is like a uniform. One could assume that a person without jewelry follows a lifestyle of simplicity.

The current *Church Manual* endorses only the Western symbol of marriage (the wedding ring) and excludes more than 13 percent of the world's population that uses a different symbol of marriage. One final recommendation is to request that the General Conference review the current position in the *Church Manual*, which does not consider the different symbols of marriage used by non-Western people groups, including South Asians. The review should also provide a supplement to or revision of the *Church Manual* to affirm and include South Asian contexts. This recommendation is needed for the Adventist Church to be more effective and reduce cultural barriers to the gospel when reaching out to the people of South Asia.

Conclusion

The Seventh-day Adventist Church brands itself as the last-day church that preaches the Three Angels' Messages and prepares men and women for Jesus' second return. Adventism puts a major emphasis on the behavior and lifestyle of its members. Early Adventist teachings stressed that the wearing of jewelry was a direct contradiction to God's ideal for a believer. However, after the 1895 mission experience of Ellen White, when she permitted her daughter-in-law to wear a wedding ring for cultural and sociological reasons, Adventists outside the United States were allowed to wear the wedding ring.

For South Asians, culture demands a very prescribed form of adornment and jewelry, which needs to be considered in the context of Ellen White's position on jewelry. Many South Asian women are expected to signify their marriage by wearing a marriage chain, nose ring, or toe ring. This is a social obligation to identify their status in society. This expectation

of South Asians within their context is similar to the one Ellen White's daughter-in-law faced. Ethel May Lacy's culture and her own family expected married women to wear the wedding ring. The co-founder of the Adventist Church recognized the negative impact if her daughter-in-law did not wear the ring. Ethel would be seen as a mistress and the Seventh-day Adventist Church would be labeled as a church that condoned adulterous practices.

South Asians are faced with an even more difficult situation. The only time a married woman is allowed to take off her marriage jewelry is after the death of her husband. According to the definition of and Adventist position on jewelry, South Asians who wear their symbols of marriage are within the boundary of the Church. Adventists are permitted to wear jewelry as long as it is to signify marriage, or it is functional, for example, tie pins, brooches, and so on. The Seventh-day Adventist Church is called to be inclusive of all people groups as it prepares men and women for Jesus Christ's second coming.

Notes

¹The root of *tiph'eret* is the verb *tip'ara* and is also translated as beautify. It appears thirteen times in the OT, six in the *piel* form, which essentially means "beautify/glorify where God is the subject and the recipient is His children" (Hamilton 1980:2:714). The additional seven uses are in the *hithpael* form, which have a similar meaning.

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Boubakar Sanou

Critical Contextualization: A Case Study of Lobi Funeral Rites in Burkina Faso

I spent the month of May 2014 in Burkina Faso doing field research in three Lobi communities concerning their funeral rites of passage. I conducted interviews with both Lobi religious leaders and Adventist Church members, and also observed a burial service. My findings broadened my understanding of the sociocultural significance of the Lobi funeral rites, the challenges they pose to Christian mission among the Lobi, and the need for a biblical and missiological framework for responding to these challenges.

Because of the general belief among the Lobi that there is life after death, funeral rites are elaborate ceremonial occasions as they are considered to be the indispensable means by which human beings pass from the land of the living to that of the ancestors (Alenuma 2002:9). Funeral rites are part of a series of rituals that vividly express the deepest concepts the Lobi have about life. They speak of death as a departure, a setting out on a journey, and a transition to ancestorhood. Nevertheless, whenever it occurs, “the soul of the deceased must undergo a series of spiritual adjustments if he or she is to find a secure place in the afterlife and continue to remain in contact with the family left behind” (Ray 1976:140). Funeral rites are performed to reduce the effect of the sudden loss as well as a means of facilitating the process by which the deceased joins the community of the ancestors. A traditional funeral is believed not only to help the deceased reach their “fathers” (i.e., enter the ancestral world) but also to “have a tomorrow” (i.e., a continuation of life in the lineage) (Abasi 1995:448, 450, 451). This is the community’s expressed desire for kinship continuity and solidarity even in death. The community’s survival is crucial and rests on the strict observance of proper burial and funeral rites to help the deceased make a good and successful journey to the ancestral world to join those who ensure life and well-being, and who become intermediaries between God and the living.

Although there are clearly non-biblical elements associated with Lobi funeral rites, some Lobi Adventists still fully take part in them. All my interviewees who did so said they were told from a young age that this was the right way of being a Lobi. A true Lobi was described to them as one who strictly follows the traditions handed down to the community by the ancestors. Full participation in one's parents' funerals is the clearest way for a child to demonstrate that he/she truly honors them. Any individual's failure to undergo the prescribed funeral rites brings not only shame on their family, it is also believed to put their family and community in danger of the ancestors' wrath. As the representatives of law, order, and ethical values in the community, the ancestors are believed to chastise any violation of their commands. Therefore, misfortune, illness, and death in the family and community are often interpreted as signs of the ancestors' anger because of an individual or family's misconduct that compromised harmony with the ancestors. Such beliefs put a lot of pressure on some Adventists to syncretize their faith.

Addressing the Challenges Lobi Funeral Rites Pose to Adventist Mission

My research showed that the following features of Lobi funeral rites are major issues from a biblical standpoint: divination associated with finding the cause of death, throwing cowries at the feet of the deceased to fund their afterlife, carving an ancestral shrine for the deceased at the end of the funeral rites, shaving the heads of the deceased's close relatives, and whitewashing the orphans, widows, and the widower (Sanou 2015:148-150). Each of these elements of their funeral rites needs to be dealt with biblically through the process of critical contextualization. "Critical Contextualization" is a term coined by Paul Hiebert in his attempt to answer the following question: "What should people do with their old cultural ways when they become Christians, and how should the missionary respond to these traditional beliefs and practices?" (Hiebert 1985:171). In doing critical contextualization, he suggests that "old beliefs and customs are neither rejected nor accepted without examination. They are first studied with regard to the meanings and places they have within their cultural setting and then evaluated in the light of biblical norms" (186).

The recognition by a local congregation of the need to deal biblically with certain aspects of their lives is the prerequisite to doing critical contextualization. This need was expressed by my interviewees during my field research. They felt that the church was not doing anything to help them deal with this cultural issue. Critical contextualization is done following four main steps as outlined by Hiebert: exegesis of the cultural

issue, exegesis of Scripture, critical response, and functional substitutes (186-190). The members of the local congregation directly affected by a change should be actively involved in the whole process because of their knowledge of the deeper and hidden meanings associated with their cultural practices. This is the reason critical contextualization should never be attempted in solo by a pastor/missionary on behalf of a local congregation.

Prescribing specific functional substitutes for the traditional Lobi funeral rites is against the philosophy of critical contextualization and was beyond the scope of my field research. This process needs to involve the Lobi believers as a hermeneutical community. However, the following tentative suggestions were arrived at after my interaction with key church leaders as to what a Lobi Adventist is to do in the event of the death of a relative or during the traditional funeral rites?

Divination to Find the Cause of Death

The divination to determine the cause of death needs to be completely discarded because the Bible clearly condemns any attempt to contact the dead (Lev 20:6, 27; Deut 18:10-13). Instead of using nonbiblical methods as a means to come to terms with the loss of a dear one, members should be encouraged to put their faith in God and the hope of the resurrection of the dead. It also should be emphasized that as the result of sin, death is inevitable in this life.

Throwing of Cowries at the Feet of the Deceased

Throwing cowries at the feet of the deceased assumes that people take on another form of existence after death and that the living relatives should ensure the deceased's journey to the land of the ancestors by giving them cowries to pay for whatever is needed during this journey. The practice of throwing cowries could be modified as follows: At the end of the mourning period, a freewill offering could be collected and prayed over for the welfare of the widow/widower and orphans in place of providing cowries to the dead for their journey to the land of the ancestors. If the deceased could see what is being done, they would be very gratified to know that their family is being cared for.

Carving of an Ancestral Shrine

A Christian memorial service could be organized, after which a picture of the deceased could be framed and kept in a designated room of the family house to encourage the living relatives of their heritage and what

they learned from the life experiences of their deceased loved one. If the deceased had indicated any special instructions for the welfare of the family, such as the need to live in unity, solidarity, and commitment to God, such desires should also be framed and placed beside the picture of the deceased.

Shaving the Head of the Deceased's Relatives

Shaving the heads of close relatives of the deceased is another practice that needs to be discarded on the basis of Deut 14:1-2 "You are the children of the Lord your God; you shall not cut yourselves nor shave the front of your head for the dead. For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth." Although shaving the hair is not completely forbidden by Scripture, as a holy people, the Israelites were not to cut their hair in connection with mourning rites for the dead. Any attempt to establish contact with the dead is deemed by God as defiling (Block 2012:344-345). Because many people shave their head as a sign of mourning to prevent any kind of retaliation from the deceased, a special time of prayer and dedication should be observed to ask God to protect the deceased's relatives against any form of attack from the evil one.

The Practice of Whitewashing

Traditional Lobi people believe that whitewashing close relatives of the deceased is necessary to protect the widow/widower and orphans against the attack of evil spirits. The widow/widower and orphans are whitewashed because it is assumed that any association with death is a threat to the whole community. As such, those connected with the deceased (surviving spouse(s) and orphans) have to be cleansed of the defiling effects of their contact with the deceased. The whiteness of the clay is seen as counteracting any death-related uncleanness. Sexual intercourse and any close relationship between husband and wife are viewed as the sharing of the dirt of each other's bodies. Whitewashing is said to free a surviving partner and orphans from any defilement received from the deceased. Unless the rite of whitewashing is performed it is believed that the dirt of the deceased partner will kill the surviving partner if he/she becomes involved in sexual intercourse with another partner. Whitewashing must be done to cleanse the dirt of the dead partner in order to enable the surviving spouse to have sexual intercourse with any future partner without risking death. Orphans whitewash their foreheads and wear strings of cowries over their shoulders (Goody 1962:101, 183-193).

To meet this cultural need of protection, the widow/widower and orphans could be dressed in white, symbolizing their protection by Christ's righteousness. A special prayer session also should be organized for them. During this special time of prayer, the pastor and church elders should lay their hands on the widow/widower and orphans, anoint them with oil, and pray that the power of the Holy Spirit will surround and continually protect them. In addition, the widow/widower and orphans should be encouraged to make a spiritual recommitment to God, regularly study the Bible, and attend church service. In its various services, the church should earnestly pray for the bereaved in their midst.

Two of my interviewees (a woman and a man) who stood firm to biblical principles despite strong social pressure said they were able to do so because of their faith in God and also because they had already experienced God's power as superior to that of local deities. I asked them to relate how they experienced God's power. The female interviewee had lost her husband and refused to perform the traditional funeral rites such as having her head shaved and her body whitewashed. Not long after that, she fell critically ill. People started saying that she was sick and would soon die because she refused to submit herself to the ways of the ancestors. She requested that the church pray that God would use her illness to glorify his name by showing the whole community that God saves those who trust him from the curses of other gods and ancestors. The church prayed and she was completely healed to the amazement of everybody in her village. She told me that she has never been threatened again. She continues to use her story to encourage others to remain faithful to Christ.

The male respondent told me that one of his clan's taboos forbade him from touching a monkey. To make ends meet, he asked an Adventist missionary to employ him as his house helper. The missionary had several monkeys and one of my interviewee's duties was to take care of them. One day as he was feeding the monkeys, one broke loose and ran into the village and took refuge on top of the idol that was in his father's shrine. When he tried to enter into the shrine to catch the monkey, onlookers told him that he was going to die. He stopped right there, said a prayer, and went in and caught the monkey and went back to the missionary's house. Early the next morning, people waited to hear news of his death. Seeing him alive and well, they realized that he serves a powerful God. That incident strengthened his faith and continues to help him stand firm for his faith.

Conclusion

It is very difficult to be relevant in our Christian witness if we do not know and address the issues with which the people we are trying to reach are wrestling. For the gospel to meaningfully engage recipients with the purpose of transforming their worldviews, Christian witnesses must always encode the biblical message in such a way that its content remains faithful to biblical principles but also makes sense to its receptors in terms of its relevance. Such new experiences often challenge them in their social location. The rationale for this is that because the gospel is always received from within one's own cultural identity, people cannot be confronted with things that are beyond their frame of reference and be expected to respond positively to them.

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Jon L. Dybdahl

Hmong Statement of Belief: A Case Study

Introduction

The Hmong are part of the Meo (or Miaw) tribal groups who have, beginning late in the 18th century, slowly migrated from South China to the rugged high lands of Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Eastern Burma. About 2.7 million still live in China and about 1.2 million have migrated to these other countries.

Since the mid-1970s many Hmong have moved to the United States, fleeing persecution and instability. These Hmong that have moved to the United States mostly come from Laos and Thailand. One factor that has led to their migration has been the fact that politically they have mostly allied themselves with the anti-communist groups in Laos. As a consequence the communist government has considered them enemies. Most still follow their traditional religion of animism and shamanism. Because so much of their lives was dominated by fear of evil spirits, the spiritual freedom that Jesus offered was especially meaningful to them.

The interchange with the Hmong, which led to the statement of belief presented in this paper, took place during the mid-1970s and is based on the Hmong population of North Thailand and Laos.

My family arrived as missionaries in Chiang Mai, North Thailand in 1968. Soon we became interested in the Hmong as we saw them in their unique garb during their visits to the market and surrounding town. As we visited them in their villages we found families who were eager to renounce their traditional religion. They decided that the freedom Jesus offered was much better than being slaves of the spirits. They wanted a change; however, they had no Christian knowledge or literature available to them at that time.

Having recently graduated from mission training at the Institute of World Mission, I had learned the importance of contextualizing for the

purpose of communicating the gospel; therefore, I, along with Pastor Leng and several other Hmong leaders, decided it would be a good thing to formulate a belief statement for new believers so they could begin to understand more clearly what Christianity was all about.

Language and Terminology

This eleven-point statement is not a translation of some earlier document in another language. Belief statements exist in English and Thai and other languages but they did not communicate well when translated for the Hmong. The question that we were trying to answer was, What are the key elements of Christian faith that Hmong believers need to understand, believe, and follow?

The Hmong had a term for the high God but knew little about him. We decided that the Hmong term for the high God was fluid enough that it could be used to describe the Christian God. That meant the belief statement would talk about someone whom the Hmong were familiar with but did not know much about. What we tried to do was fill a somewhat familiar term with Christian meaning.

The Hmong also had a name we felt could be used for Satan. Spirits for the Hmong were ordered in hierarchies. At the head of the hierarchy was the great cow spirit—Satan.

It also seemed to us that confessional/catechism type of statement that came in the form of question and answer would be the easiest to communicate among them. What follows is the eleven point question (Q) and answer (A) statement called “The Way of Faith” followed by my brief comments (C). These are simple statements we felt it was important for them to understand, believe, and practice.

The Way of Faith

1. Q: *Who created the world?*

A: I believe that God (Hmong name for God) created the world, animals, and humans in six days.

C: This statement emphasizes the fact that God, whose name they know but do not understand, made everything they see in their world in six days. Hmong traditions contain many Old Testament stories.

2: Q: *What is this Creator God like?*

A: I believe that He has greater power than Satan, spirits, and people. He loves us because he created us and is our heavenly Father.

C: Not only is God the Creator, he also has supreme power. Fear of the spirits governs the everyday life of the Hmong and knowing that God has

power over Satan and his spirits is a great relief. God also loves us. This is a new revelation to people who fear divine power and usually avoid interaction with God.

3: Q: *How should we worship this God we speak of?*

A: I believe that we honor and worship God when we sing and pray together and remember his creation by resting on the seventh day as he gave us an example.

C: Once one believes that God is great and loving, we must ask the question about what our response to this God should be. We honor and worship him through song, prayer, and Sabbath observance. From day one we taught people to sing and pray. Prayer was greatly appreciated because it was the way to tap into God's power and fight the evil forces. Singing songs did much the same. Among women loved the Sabbath because normally they worked every day. To have a day of rest that was ordered by God enabled them to have a much needed day of rest and change.

4: Q: *What was the world like, which God created?*

A: I believe that the world which God created was beautiful. Evil, sickness, poverty, suffering, and death were not present.

C: See question 5 for comment

5: Q: *Why then is the world today full of sickness, suffering and death?*

A: I believe that because humanity disobeyed God this caused all kinds of evil to spread over all of us.

C: Beliefs four and five are meant to explain the situation in our world today and explain why good and evil things happen. This forms the basis for the plan of Salvation and the role of Jesus as Savior.

6: Q: *Who has the authority and power to help us escape evil and judgment?*

A: I believe that because God loved us he sent the divine Savior Jesus to help us escape from sin and the grasp of the evil spirits.

C: Here, Jesus as Savior is introduced as the answer to the sin problem and the one who frees people from the evil spirits. Further statements fill out this idea in more detail.

7: Q: *How does our divine Savior Jesus help us escape from evil, punishment, and the grasp of the devil?*

A: I believe that because our divine Savior Jesus died in our place on the cross he has the power to help us. If we believe in our divine Savior Jesus and discard and renounce our spirit beliefs then Jesus will help us escape from evil and will wash our hearts, making them white and new. He will not allow the spirits to have any power over us.

C: Here the death of Jesus for our sin is introduced. At this point the story of Jesus and the cross needs to be told. Now people are called to leave their spirit worship and believe in Jesus as Savior and Deliverer.

8. Q: *Will we always live on this earth or will we go somewhere else?*

A: I believe that if we believe in our divine Savior, Jesus, and wait for him, he will return and take us to live with him in the new heavenly city he is preparing. We will live forever there and all sickness, pain, crying, and death will be no more.

C: This statement teaches concerning the second coming and heaven, thus giving hope for the future.

9. Q: *If we die before our Savior Jesus returns how will we rise from the dead?*

A: I believe that when Jesus returns the second time he will bring us back to life and give eternal life with no more death.

C: We should not only believe in Jesus and his resurrection but his coming back to life also gives us hope as the basis for our resurrection. We do not need to fear death if we accept this Jesus.

10. Q: *As we await the return of Jesus how should we live?*

A: I believe that we should live as Jesus taught us. We should love one another and join in teaching the Jesus message to those who do not know it. We should live by the Ten Commandments and keep our bodies clean. We should not use opium or tobacco, drink liquor, or eat the meat which God has not given us permission to eat. We will give a tithe of our earnings to help spread the message of God to the whole world.

C: After we accept Jesus, and await his return there is a new life we need to live. Some key elements of this life are spelled out in this statement. In addition to some of the typical Adventist issues of healthy living and tithing, this belief states the missionary imperative to witness to others.

11. Q: *What should we do to keep close to God and avoid falling into sin?*

A: I believe that we should daily sing, pray, and study God's message.

C: At the time this was written, most of the Hmong lived in small, isolated villages that were 100% Hmong. Most were illiterate but they could gather daily to sing and pray together. This belief is meant to be practiced individually and corporately.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does this statement differ from traditional statements of belief?
2. What beliefs should be added or subtracted? Why?
3. Is creating a statement like this valid?
4. What would a statement of faith similar to this look like in 21st century North America.

Key Missiological Implications of the Hmong Case Study

This case study exploring the Hmong statement of belief is more than just a story. Embedded and implied in it are certain key missiological principles which should be considered any time a particular belief statement is framed. Specifically, it assumes that the gospel must be presented in ways that are culturally relevant. Responsible communicators must adapt their message so that it can communicate the gospel to their intended audience with clarity and power. A missionary must prayerfully consider both *how* the truths of Scripture can be best articulated in a new cultural context, as well as just *what* truths ought to be presented.

It may appear to some that calling for such adaptation is dangerous because it will “water down” the truths of the Bible. There are, however, at least four bits of counsel that ought to guide everyone who attempts to articulate statements of belief in diverse cultural contexts.

1. Cross-cultural workers need to remind themselves of the simple, unavoidable fact that *all belief statements are produced in a particular context*. That context has to do with the time or historical situation and the specific culture of all parties involved. Acknowledging this fact should help God’s witnesses to be more intentional about listening carefully to the local context before beginning the difficult work of formulating belief statements.

2. Cross-cultural workers ought to remind themselves that the writers of a statement of belief and their audience *both have their own unique cultural perspectives*. Too often those who are stating or explaining beliefs assume they must understand the culture of their audience but they forget that their own context must be understood and recognized as well.

3. This process cannot be rushed, because *the clearer the understanding of the context the more powerful and appropriate the resulting statements will be*. Unfortunately many times writers of statements hastily look at the context and do not understand it in depth before they begin their actual writing.

4. Finally, God’s people must recognize that this process of contextualizing our message never ends. *Over time, contexts change and so should the statements*. This does not mean that foundational beliefs should be forgotten, but rather, that the way they are stated will need to change if we want the truth to be readily understood. The truth we share should not merely be an old truth, presented in the same old way. Instead, we are to share present truth in ways that make sense to people in their own cultural context. This is what it means to be a faithful witness for Christ.

Conclusion

About 40 years have passed since this statement of belief was written, many changes have occurred among the Hmong. They have increasingly been influenced by the Thai and Laos cultures that surround them. Some change has also occurred in the church. This means that if the statement was written today there would be some differences and probably some additions like the Lord's Supper, and baptism.

Although the Hmong are a very small percentage of the total Thai population, they are the largest ethnic percentage group in the Thai Adventist Church.



Jon has a passion that the gospel of Jesus go to every nation tribe and people. In pursuit of that goal he has served as a pioneer missionary as well as a teacher of mission and a writer on mission topics.

Bruce L. Bauer

Japanese Baptismal Vows

In the 1970s and 1980s most Japanese Adventist churches followed the practice of having baptismal candidates stand in the front of the church while the pastor read the thirteen statements of faith. For many, this was the first time they had met most of the church members and it was obvious that they felt very uncomfortable. It was almost like they were being interrogated. In response to each statement they would say “yes” with their eyes lowered and with their body language letting everyone know that they were not enjoying this initiation ceremony.

Japan is a group-conscious society where belonging to the group is of vital importance. To be different, to stand out in a crowd, to not fit in is one of the worst experiences a Japanese person can go through. As I saw the discomfort, the feeling of being an outsider, of being questioned in front of strangers about personal beliefs, I knew there had to be a better way to welcome new members into the church.

In response I re-wrote the baptismal vows in the first person singular when only one person was being baptized and in the first person plural when more than one was being baptized. Those being baptized would read the first statement, “we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as our personal Savior.” I also gave copies to all the members in the pews, and they would respond, “I believe that too.” The antiphonal response completely changed the atmosphere and indicated to the baptismal candidates that they were part of a group. They were being affirmed and assured that everyone else in the audience believed just like they did. There was a sense of groupness that did away with the awkwardness that characterized the usual way of going through this aspect of the baptismal ceremony.

In Osaka, there were also those who gave square pieces of paper in various colors that were usually used for *origami* (Japanese paper folding) to all the members when people were being baptized. Everyone was encouraged to write a Bible promise, give a word of encouragement, or

share a favorite passage for those being baptized. A couple of people took pictures of the baptism, the pot luck that followed, and with all the papers a group of people put together a scrapbook that highlighted each person's baptism.

Missiological Implications

The Seventh-day Adventist Church grew and developed in the North American context, doing things in a North American way. Unfortunately North American practices have been exported to the rest of the world and presented as the "correct" way of doing church. However, when church practices are copied by countries with totally different cultures and ways of doing things, unintended results often occur. In this case the joyfulness of being baptized and joining a group of God's people was completely overshadowed by a North American way of doing things.

Initiation ceremonies are important in most cultures; however, they need to be carried out in culturally sensitive ways. The changes suggested above did not change in any way the purpose or content of the baptismal day. The only thing that was changed was a strong emphasis on groupness. The missiological implication from this case study is that one size does not fit all situations. There is more than one way to do most church ceremonies, so church leaders need to be encouraged to rethink what they do and do everything in culturally sensitive ways.



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L. Asher

Sinolization of Christianity: Increasing Gospel Relevance or Distorting the Gospel Message?

One critical predicament Christianity encounters in China is the long-term unresolved problem of its legitimacy in the Chinese cultural context (Yang, 2014). The Western packaging of the gospel still hinders the acceptance of Christianity in Chinese society because of the tremendous difference between the Chinese religious spirit and the traditional Christian message. Based on this reality, scholars from mainly non-Christian perspectives propose the concept of Sinolization in order to bridge these differences (Tang 2013; Fan 2015; Zhang and Tang 2017).

Due to the unique cultural and political environment in China, the motif of Sinolization has become a prevalent theme among the official Three-Self churches. Even though there are different opinions regarding the ways of Sinolization, these voices have not received adequate attention from the authorities. At the same time, the Chinese church, especially the Adventist Church, has basically neglected any study of the effect of cultural on its beliefs and practices, and as a result, it has not developed an appropriate response to Sinolization. This has placed it at risk in losing its identity in the Chinese cultural context.

This study aims to address the concept of the Sinolization of Christianity in light of cultural studies, biblical principles, and the Great Controversy perspective. It will then set forth some ideas on how it could affect the communication of the gospel in the Chinese context. It will attempt to see if Sinolization makes the gospel more relevant or further distorts the Christian message through the lens of the Chinese culture. The answers to these questions should help Chinese Christians, and especially Adventists, better understand their mission in China.

The Background of Sinolization of Christianity

What is the Sinolization of Christianity? At first glance, it seems to be a wonderful concept because the gospel must be contextualized if it intends to influence Chinese culture. We may assume that under Sinolization, Christians find a more effective way to communicate the gospel as a culturally relevant message without sacrificing its true meaning. However, there could be unexpected twists of meaning as Sinolization is evaluated in its specific political and cultural contexts.

It is notable that the Sinolization of Christianity is a relatively new concept set forth by some official Chinese government scholars such as Zhuo (2014) and Zhang (2011). Based on Zhuo's theory, Christian thought is alien to Chinese culture, and must be Sinolized in order to be understood by Chinese society. He claims that the purpose of this strategy is for the benefit of Christianity. However, Zhang's theory, which adopts Mou's (2006) religious ecological concept, makes the observation that the rapid development of Christianity has broken the religious ecological balance in Chinese society, and therefore, it needs to be Sinolized in order to maintain the harmonious relationship within the larger Chinese culture.

The two theories of Zhang and Zhuo appear to be somewhat contradictory. Either Sinolization benefits Christianity (Zhuo) or it is responding to the rapid development of Christianity (Zhang). These two explanations cannot escape the fact that the concept of Sinolization is "a political movement per se" and aims to transform Christianity with a political ideology (Guo 2017). The current emphasis of Sinolization is similar to the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in the 1950s, which was designed to meet a political purpose to control Christian churches so they would not be a disruptive element in society. As Cohen explains, the government regards the existence of Christianity as an "uneasy presence" (Lim 2013:3) in Chinese society and makes the regime's long-term viability as "the most important" issue in its political agenda (Vala 2013:59). Based on this assumption, religion must be placed in a subordinate position under political control. Therefore the Sinolization of Christianity seeks to limit the freedom to propagate the Christian message, which if not limited might in turn threaten the balance of influence in Chinese society.

The Sinolization of Christianity as a Cultural Movement

Despite its strong political influence, Sinolization still needs to be studied as a strategy to deal with the vast difference between Western Christian thought and Eastern Chinese culture, which is a mixture of Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and various folk beliefs.

After thousands of years of development, Chinese culture has become a formidable power that not only includes the philosophy of the ancient thought leaders, but also seeks to absorb any alien religious thought and philosophies into its own system. Under the diversity of religious forms, the main principle that guides Chinese religion is the philosophy of “the unity of heaven and man” rooted in Taoist thought (Li 2013). Unlike Western philosophy, which is constructed based on concepts and categories and which makes a clear division between opposite concepts, the Chinese people see no such demarcation. They try to reconcile different thoughts based on their understanding of heaven (truth) by absorbing them into their hearts.

As a result, one significant characteristic of Chinese culture is pragmatism. It means that people choose a religion based on their personal everyday needs instead of whether their religion is based on truth. They tend to be polytheistic and thus have no problem in incorporating the Christian God into their pantheon. They can even create new gods or add new functions to their existing gods when it is necessary to experience help in their daily lives. Anything that is not in violation of the key principle of the “unity between heaven and man” and the principle of pragmatism, is acceptable. As a result many people have no trouble in blending the concept of the Christian God into their belief system. Therefore, the Sinolization of Christianity is not a problem for Chinese cultural practices and its capacity to accommodate outside religions.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that the Sinolization of Christianity has the capacity to appropriately communicate the Christian message in a Chinese cultural setting while maintaining the true biblical meaning of salvation. Even though Chinese culture can accommodate Christianity, it cannot accept Christian truth. It seems there is a strong mechanism within the Chinese culture which prevents it from truly accepting the Christian message.

This mechanism influences Chinese people to regard their culture as superior to anything from other cultures, especially Western ones, and thus causes most Chinese to reject the Christian message. At the core of this mechanism is the Chinese people’s worldview, which emphasizes and takes its inspiration from nature with its resonance between the human heart and the natural spirit (Qi 2016). This view leaves no room for pursuing truth. Driven by this pragmatic thinking, Chinese culture tends to have a strong anti-intellectualistic sentiment.

Anti-intellectualism is a concept coined by Hofstadter. He notes that this word is difficult to define, but it can be treated as “an attitude” that dislikes “intellect or intellectuals” (1962:7). Even though it is a relatively new concept, the reality of anti-intellectualism has existed in various

cultures for a long time. For Chinese culture, its anti-intellectualism can be seen in Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

For example, Lao Zi says, “It is when knowledge and wisdom appear that the Great Hypocrisy emerges;” “Banish wisdom and discard knowledge, and the people will benefit a hundredfold” (Cai 2009:75, 79). However, this anti-intellectualism, as Hofstadter mentions, is not found “in a pure form but in ambivalence” (1962:7). It is a relative, rather than an absolute anti-intellectualism because it has its own pursuit of knowledge (Song 2008).

Based on this anti-intellectualism, even though Chinese culture can accommodate Christianity, it cannot readily accept Christian truths such as the worship of only one true God or the need for redemption from sin because those concepts stand in contrast to the polytheistic worship and pragmatism in Chinese culture. In other words, Chinese culture can only accommodate Christianity in the sense that the Christian God provides another possible way of receiving a blessing in people’s daily lives. Based on this assumption, the Sinolization of Christianity will eventually look like the Sinolization of Buddhism, which is a Buddhism clothed in the form of Indian Buddhism while accommodating the meaning of Chinese culture and the creation of their own Chinese scriptures (Fan 2015). Obviously, this result is not acceptable for a biblical Christian identity.

Sinolization of Christianity from the Biblical Perspective

When presenting the gospel message in new cultural settings, Christians seek to communicate the gospel in biblically appropriate ways that are also culturally sensitive. Christian witnesses seek to “raise up effective sources of the Christian message from within the respondent culture” (Hesselgrave 2009:428). In other words, gospel communication should be receptor oriented (Kraft 1991). This communication strategy is based on biblical teachings, such as the incarnation of Jesus in John 1:14. He set an example of becoming flesh in order that people could be reached. The apostle Paul also established the principle of becoming “all things to all people” in order to save some “by all possible means” (1 Cor 9:22). This well-known strategy is called contextualization.

Contextualization espouses that the Christian message needs to be clothed in a form that is understandable to people in different cultural settings, including the Chinese culture. In other words, the Christian message can be resilient in different forms as it encounters different contexts. As a result, from both the Chinese cultural side and the Christian side, there are no barriers for the Sinolization of Christianity. Both have adequate capacity to accommodate each other.

However, any contextualization is risky and can lead to syncretism (Kraft 2009:405), which further leads to a loss of the Christian identity. Because of this, Paul Hiebert (1984) proposes the concept of critical contextualization, which requires abandoning any cultural practices that violate biblical principles and keeping those that are in harmony with the Bible.

Hiebert's proposal demonstrates that the extent of contextualization is only partial, instead of complete. In whatever form the Christian message may take, the essential message of salvation should not change. It means that from both the Chinese cultural side and the Christian side, some respective elements exist, which makes them resistant to one another. From the biblical perspective, the gospel tries to maintain its core value, which is the Savior's redeeming of humanity from sin. The biblical goal is the Christianization of China. From the Chinese cultural side, it tries to maintain its cultural framework, which is the unity between heaven and humanity and to reject the Christian doctrines regarding salvation. Its aim is the Sinolization of Christianity.

Christianity, like Chinese culture, also possesses a certain degree of anti-intellectualism. As Hofstadter mentions, Protestantism is "the first arena for an anti-intellectual impulse" in North America (1962:55). For example, the evangelist Charles Finney was convinced that "the schools are to a great extent spoiling the ministers" and he considered the young ministers coming "out of college with hearts as hard as the college walls" (94). John Piper's (2010) book *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* also describes in great detail the phenomena of anti-intellectualism in Christianity. In the Chinese version of this book, the translator especially mentions that not only Christians in America, but also those in China possess this strong sentiment of anti-intellectualism.

This Chinese-Christian anti-intellectualism, like that in Chinese culture, is driven by pragmatism and pluralism (Piper 2010). The difference is that the anti-intellectualism in Chinese culture causes it to resist the core of the Christian message such as salvation from sin and eternal life. In some sense, it Sinolizes Christianity not only in its cultural form, but also in its meaning. It means that the anti-intellectualism in Chinese culture serves as a self-protecting force by entirely assimilating Christianity. The result is syncretism.

However, the anti-intellectualism among Christians is not uniform. For example, the Shouters (a Chinese denomination whose worship is featured with shouting "Amen" all the time) generally reject both theological study and Chinese culture at the same time. But for many other Christian anti-intellectualists, although they despise theology, especially systematic theology, they still are inclined to accept Chinese culture. Whether rejecting or accepting Chinese culture, as Piper (2010) indicates,

this anti-intellectualism causes many Christians to lose the knowledge about salvation as presented in the Bible and thus results in Christianity losing its identity in the process of Sinolization.

In summary, the pragmatism in Chinese culture and the contextualization of the Christian message both allow for the possibility of the Sinolization of Christianity. But the anti-intellectualism in Chinese culture requires that the Sinolization of Christianity must allow for the Eastern cultural superior to overshadow Christianity. As a result, it is not pragmatism that has caused the failure of the Christian mission in China, rather the danger is that Chinese pragmatism is the starting point for Sinolization (Fan 2015). This is dangerous because the pragmatism will ultimately require that Christianity be completely assimilated, including its core values. Therefore, the Sinolization of Christianity is entirely different from the missiological concept of contextualization or indigenization, which seeks to present the gospel in understandable cultural forms while keeping its Christian meanings. Sinolization does not make the gospel relevant, but, on the contrary, distorts the gospel in the Chinese context.

The Sinolization of Christianity from the Perspective of the Great Controversy

The preceding discussion shows that even under the influence of Sinolization, there is an irreconcilable contradiction between Christianity and Chinese culture. The former seeks to bring the nation of China into the kingdom of God, while the latter intends to assimilate the kingdom of God into the Chinese context. This controversy is in fact the same great struggle between God's kingdom and Satan's kingdom. It does not mean that a certain country or culture belongs to Satan while others belong to God. It simply implies that the intention, in trying to assimilate the gospel into any human culture, will only serve the purpose of Satan.

H. R. Niebuhr proposed five different possibilities in the relationship between gospel and culture (1951). These views include Christ against culture, the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture. Niebuhr's view indicates that within every culture of the world, there are elements in accordance with biblical principles, but at the same time, every culture also bears elements distorted by sin. This reality justifies the principle of critical contextualization.

When considering Chinese culture, although it is open and tolerant to other religions on a superficial level, it is in fact opposed to any religion's deeper meaning. The Christian message can by no means be Sinolized if it still wants to keep its identity. The communication of the gospel in

human contexts is “caught up in a great struggle—the conflict of the ages” (Ladd 2009:88). The Christian mission is to announce the coming of God’s kingdom to this world. When God’s kingdom is announced in any other kingdom, conflict cannot be avoided. As Jesus says, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt 12:28).

This theme of conflict is echoed in the Great Controversy that is featured in Adventist theology. We believe that this cosmic conflict started in heaven even before the earth was created (Rev12:7-10). This same conflict led to the fall of Adam and Eve. Furthermore, this conflict is repeated throughout the whole Bible, in human history, and even in the heart of every person. Naturally, this conflict exists whenever the gospel is communicated in any cultural setting, and is especially evident in the process of the Sinolization of Christianity.

Adventist theology provides special means that help people overcome anti-intellectualism. Doctrines such as the Great Controversy, the sanctuary, the pre-Advent judgment, and the emphasis of God’s laws help people focus on biblical truth and encourage people to think rationally about the Christian faith and the world to come. Both an emphasis on the Great Controversy and the elements of anti-intellectualism help people better understand the nature of the Sinolization of Christianity. Understanding these issues also help Christians know how to deal with the cultural problems in cross-cultural gospel communication.

Conclusion

The Sinolization of Christianity is a double-edged sword for the Christian message. It provides space allowing Christianity to be expressed in understandable forms for the Chinese people. Both Chinese culture and Christianity have the capacity to embrace each other. However, Sinolization will most likely also cause syncretism, with Chinese culture assimilating crucial elements of Christianity and causing it to lose its unique identity. The Sinolization of Christianity in fact does not make gospel relevant in Chinese culture, it distorts it.

The way to avoid such a distortion is to recognize that both Chinese culture and Christianity have inner immune systems to guard their respective core values, and thus reject each other at the deepest levels. Chinese culture will not abandon the unity of heaven and humanity as its basis or its emphasis on pragmatism. In addition, its anti-intellectualism greatly strengthens these foundational principles. Christianity, in the same manner, cannot be assimilated into the Chinese culture, which would sacrifice its message of salvation. As a result, there is an irreconcilable

conflict between the Chinese culture and Christianity, which is reflected in the Great Controversy theme of Adventist theology. Such a theme will help people understand more accurately the relationship between gospel and culture and help Christianity maintain its identity in its cross-cultural mission.

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Reaching Thai Buddhists and Those with a Background in Thai Buddhist Beliefs

Introduction

One of the greatest challenges for those working across cultures is to understand the unique features of the host culture and the dominant religious beliefs and practices found in the society represented. If this is to be done acceptably, the written and spoken language must be mastered and personal friendships formed with community members. Much damage has been done by Western missionaries arriving with preconceived ideas on evangelism taken from their home country and with an attitude of being holders of superior knowledge in many areas of thought beyond that held by the host culture.

Catholic missionary activity has been on-going in Thailand since 1665, Protestants since 1828, and by Adventists since 1906 (Insom 2006:43; Carmody 2017:54). The early pioneers showed great energy and persistence and one cannot help but have great admiration for them. The experiences and successes recorded have been many and varied. The techniques adopted have included literature evangelism, evangelistic outreach efforts, healing ministries, health promotion, education (primary to tertiary), radio ministry, relief work, and other activities. The overall impact of the total mission effort by all denominations has been minimal with Christians representing an estimated 0.74-1.2 percent of the population (Carmody 2017:49; Christian Presence Map 2018).

A Buddhist Study Center was initially created in Thailand (1992) by Clif Maberly as an initiative of Global Mission coming from the General Conference (Krause 2010; Chavez 2011). This has most recently been replaced by a Center of East Asian Religions and Traditions. Thailand is the stronghold of Theravada Buddhism, but animism and Brahmanism are evident among other influences and in the surrounding countries other forms of Buddhism are practiced. The Adventist International Institute

of Advanced Studies (Philippines) has sought to help in the monumental task of reaching the predominantly Buddhist communities in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam by running Bible conferences with church leaders to familiarize them with methods to introduce people to Jesus and the hope of his soon return (Campbell 2015). Many fine efforts, helpful booklets, and methods have been tried (e.g., Griswold 2014) including those of Adventist Frontier Missions (AFM). This latter organization (established 1985) sends out long-term missionaries to unreached groups (Adventist Frontier Missions 2018). Those who have met Jesus on their journey to find meaning in life usually have encountered authentic people with a passion to share in a manner that is culturally acceptable (AWR360 n.d; Kijai and Matthews 2007; Griswold 2012; Adventist World/Adventist Review Staff 2014). This is in line with the advice penned by Ellen White: "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with [them] as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow me'" (1955:143).

Creation of the Facilitator's Guide

Reaching across the cultural barriers is a particularly difficult issue, for considerable cultural diversity exists within the Adventist Church and this influences the missiological approach taken or indeed permitted (Hörschele 2004:32-48; cf. Acts 15). Here we highlight the latest initiative of AFM spearheaded by anthropologist and former missionary in Thailand, Daniëlle Koning. A mini-conference held in Khon Kaen in March of 2017 with groups of representatives from AFM, Asia-Pacific International University, the Center of East Asian Religions and Traditions, and the Thailand Adventist Mission, discussed in depth the approach recommended in the manuscript "Facilitator's Guide to Introducing Christianity to Thai Buddhists." The primary purpose of the Guide is to lead those with little or no experience of understanding Christianity to a meaningful experience with Christ and to a knowledge of core Bible teachings. A positive experience will lead to a readiness for baptism and an enthusiasm to invite friends to share a similar experience.

The Guide pays close attention to the characteristics of the Thai people identified by students of the culture (Komin 1991; N. Mejudhon 1997; U. Mejudhon 1997), it promotes a gentle approach and an intense commitment to the value of the single lost sheep/soul, a commitment to satisfy felt needs, and it continually seeks to lead the listener to an appreciation that the most valuable discovery in this life is the Creator, Sustainer, and Savior of the universe. Consequently, the time taken for this introduction

to become stable is not a major concern. The teachings of the Adventist Church are emphasized as they can be shown to illuminate the character of Christ, can enthuse listeners to seek to emulate his example, and as they provide freedom from fear through the power of the Holy Spirit. Deeper understanding comes with time.

The Guide is structured around two main objectives as follows. First, to connect Thai Buddhists to the Christian God, community, and ethics initially in a way that is closely aligned with their needs and worldview. Second, to expand the understanding of Thai Buddhists towards the Christian God and the practice of Christian ethics and community involvement in such a way as to counter the deeply held works-orientation characteristic of Thai society. The transition involves moving from a giving to gain merit approach to a Christian worldview of giving in response to receiving *grace*.

The Guide is presented in five stages: (1) experiencing love and care in and by a Christian community, (2) experiencing God's power and care, (3) reciprocating God and human beings, (4) relationizing God, and (5) choosing to honor God. The inner logic of the five stages is as follows. Stages 1 to 3 connect Thai Buddhists (TBs) and those with Thai Buddhist background beliefs (TBbbs) to the Christian God, Christian community, and Christian ethics in an initial way that is strongly aligned with their needs and worldview (addresses Objective 1 above). A strong effort is made to contextualize so as to affirm participants. It is significant to TBs and TBbbs to understand how they can be helped now (Komin 1991:171). Stage 1 is benefit-oriented from a community starting point (receiving from community). Stage 2 is benefit-oriented from a spiritual starting point (receiving from God). Stage 3 is morality-oriented: it centers on how to be a good person. This builds on the well-recognized Thai moral principles (Plamintr 2007:133-153). The third stage naturally follows the first two stages, because receiving blessings (in stages 1 and 2) will naturally inspire the desire in TBs/TBbbs to reciprocate to both spiritual and human beings by doing good deeds (in stage 3). In Thai religion, there are two central foci: *power* (or blessing/wish fulfillment) and *virtue* (or moral goodness), which are directly linked to each other. Stages 1 and 2 correspond to the emphasis on *power*, while stage 3 corresponds to the emphasis on *virtue*. Stages 1 to 3 in this way closely align with the fundamental concept of *karma*, the fixed connection between blessings and good deeds, a concept that is central in Thai religion. Stages 1 to 3 therefore build an introduction to Christianity that rests on a culturally familiar logic.

Stages 4 and 5 take TBs/TBbbs on a steeper learning curve to alter and expand both their understanding of the Christian God and their practice of Christian ethics and community life (addresses Objective 2 above). In

stage 4, TBs'/TBbbs' view of God grows from a flat, karmic understanding to a historicized, relational understanding. Growing through these stages demands a meek approach on the presenters part, which includes the possibility of allowing other points of view to exist until the appropriate development has taken place. In other words, maintaining smooth relationships is fundamental to success (Komin 1991:143-146). In stage 5, TBs/TBbbs are invited to choose a fuller allegiance to God, which includes a more comprehensive application of Christian life-style principles including more controversial issues as well as the choice for baptism.

Further, the five stages are set up in such a way as to counter the deeply held *works orientation* in TB society: doing good to receive good. In stages 1 and 2, TBs first experience receiving. Stage 3 responds to this by doing something in return. Likewise, in stage 4 TBs learn on a deeper level how much they have received from God. Stage 5 consequently invites them to do something in return again, though now on a more difficult level than in stage 3. The biblical order of grace (i.e., giving in response to receiving), instead of the TB order of works (i.e., giving in order to receive) is therefore embedded in the very sequence of the stages.

In practice, the stages may not always be perfectly separate. Stages 1 and 2 may coincide when some level of interaction with a Christian community is combined with prayer experiments. Stages 1, 2, and 3 may coincide when receiving benefits from a community and from God quickly leads to the desire to reciprocate. The stages are therefore not a description of perfectly separate steps. Rather, they are intended to inform the facilitator of the overall most effective sequence of learning objectives and tools in a TBs'/TBbbs' movement towards Christ. The Guide authors have taken seriously the plea "that the Saviour desires [nothing] so much as agents who will represent to the world His Spirit and His character" and give a "manifestation through humanity of the Saviour's love" (White 1911:600).

It is acknowledged that additional content could be added to these stages following field experience. The narrative learning tools in the second and third stages assume an inductive approach to learning that is inspired by the Discovery Bible Study (DBS) method (Beloit SDA Connect 2018). This approach involves the facilitator "teaching" primarily through question asking until the delineated key lesson of the story is grasped. The approach seeks to capitalize on the high self-esteem Thais have for independence and dignity. Great care is taken to avoid entering into dispute (Komin 1991:133).

The Guide rests heavily on Bible stories, many of them related by Jesus. For every Bible story used, in both group and individual study settings, the following format (adapted from DBS) is used:

1. *Review and pray*: Review of one's life; review of the last lesson, its application and sharing it; praying together (in stages 2 and 3, this includes requesting and thanksgiving, in stages 4 and 5, praise and confession are added).
2. *Introduce*: Narrate or read the new story twice.
3. *Retell*: Have the group/individual retell the story in their/his/her own words, after that narrate/read/enact one more time.
4. *Explore*: Ask exploratory questions that guide the group/individual to grasp the delineated key lesson of the story.
5. *Invite questions*.
6. *Add/address/avoid*: Add meaning/address misunderstanding/avoid distraction in regard to the story.
7. *Apply*: Draw out and invite commitment to the practical implications of the story's key lesson.
8. *Share*: Decide which one will share the story and/or practical help with.
9. *Pray*: This time, the prayer is more connected to the story/topic that was discussed.

In the fourth stage the same format is used, but its stories do not consist of Bible passages but of freely synthesized, contextualized biblical narratives related to a particular theme. In the fifth stage, an altered format of the above eight steps is used.

Field Testing Experience

The outlined stages, objectives, and learning tools in this Guide together constitute a contextualized Christian discipling program tailored specifically to TBs/TBbbs. The program was developed on the basis of extensive cultural research from 2013-2016 among Buddhists and Christians in Thailand. It now has been translated into Thai and has and continues to be field tested, with early promising results.

Jared and Tonya Wright began field testing of the *Guide* in their home early in June, 2018. They began by inviting their housekeeper and her husband, both Thai Buddhists, to study with them and their local ministry partner, Nilubon Srisai, a young Adventist woman, every Wednesday evening. Nilubon would tell the stories and then ask the wife and husband to recite the stories from memory, and answer any questions they might have. After each study session, the Thai Buddhist couple was encouraged to share a printed copy of the Bible story with their relatives and neighbors.

In August, 2018, Jared, Tonya, and Nilubon asked if the Thai Buddhist couple would be willing to help them start a Bible study in their home

village. The couple happily agreed, and helped to arrange a group of about 8-10 of their neighbors to meet every Wednesday evening. About 5-6 people continue to attend regularly, but there is an additional group of 15-20 people who regularly receive a printed copy of the Bible story each week from one of the regular attendees. Often, new people will come to the Wednesday night Bible study and relate how they had been hearing the Bible stories recited to them from a friend or relative. Additionally, there is usually a group of elementary school children who come every Wednesday. Though the Bible study time was not originally intended for kids, Tonya began creating activities for children each week which complements the Bible story being shared. Several adults have come to the Bible study after one of their children brought a printed Bible story home for them and recited the story they had heard the adults sharing.

One of the key factors that Jared and Tonya believe has contributed to regular attendance from week to week and engagement with the Guide, is the prayer and sharing time outlined. Praying with the people for specific issues and situations in their lives and then intentionally asking them to share each week how God answered those prayers, has helped to strongly reinforce one of the main objectives of the Guide, which is that the God of the Bible is a real person who wants to connect with them in their daily lives.

Summary

The Facilitator's Guide represents, as far as we are aware, the first systematic guide for approaching Thai Buddhists in a culturally sensitive manner and that is set out in a form to encourage wide use. The Guide commences by affirming similarities in values held by Christians and Buddhists, then sharing and experiencing God's care and answers to prayer, which leads naturally to a desire to reciprocate both in respect to God and to share blessings with others. Such an introduction rests on logic familiar to hearers. Forming close, friendly relationships with Buddhists and presenting Christian principles in a meek, non-confrontational way, prepares them for possible changes to their worldview.

The final two stages of the Guide aims at presenting a view of God's character that will attract listeners to participate whole-heartedly in forming a personal relationship with their Creator and Redeemer. This commitment then leads on, hopefully, to a desire to honor God in terms of time, resources, talents, and to a desire to join his church through baptism. Hearers introduced and nurtured in this manner wish to share their positive experience with others.

The approach utilizes the well-known device of story-telling, using the Bible as the principal source. Participants learn to pray together, interact

in various ways such as to explore and comment on the stories related or read to them. Presenters naturally can be effective only as they have experienced God's love and grace and as they respect the Thai cultural ways and sensitivities. Early field testing results have been promising.

Recommendations

We encourage readers who have contact with Buddhists to implement or adapt the material developed by the AFM team. Feedback to the organization would be welcome. The Guide may be accessed at: <http://www.afmonline.org/resources/reaching-buddhists>. Updates will be made as experience and feedback dictates.

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Cristian Dumitrescu with Hatsarmaveth Venkaya

The Reality and the Apparent: Worldviews and Missiological Strategies

The Worldview Concept

Worldview is an abstract concept used for identifying a set of assumptions people use to organize their view of reality. Conceptualizing worldview is a challenging task. Nobody has seen a worldview, but everybody has one. A worldview informs a person's interpretation of reality, their cosmology, and determines their actions and reactions. Charles Kraft (1988) considers worldview as the "center control box" of a person's life and communal culture. Most assumptions reflect one's unverified beliefs and answers to fundamental questions, such as who they are and who others are, how people should relate to each other, what causes things to happen, what time is, or how a group defines and interprets space. A people's worldview provides the meanings to be attached to the forms they observe. People evaluate the world around them based on their assumptions. Their logic and feelings are informed by their worldview. People even read and interpret Scripture in the light of their own set of assumptions.

In order to move people from where they are, missionaries need to discover where people really are. This process is made difficult by the hidden nature of assumptions. What is apparent may not be real. As Paul Hiebert notes (2008), the process of discovering a different worldview requires a metacultural grid that will make comparison between the missionaries' and the peoples' worldview possible. It is what Charles Van Engen calls "a cultural and spiritual interface" (1998:63). In order to further complicate the matter, missionaries too often do not know their own worldview. They cannot evaluate their own assumptions unless they are confronted or faced with a different culture sharing a different worldview. It is like going to war with a gun, only to discover that you do not have the right bullets. Such a crisis moment reveals the underlying assumptions people

operate with. When people realize they are not able to operate in a new context, they are forced to check their assumptions.

Such moments may occur when a person's reading and understanding of Scripture has no cultural equivalent in the new culture. For example, the tribes on the island of Papua have no idea what lambs or sheep look like or what their main characteristics are. To present Jesus to them as the Lamb of God creates a void often filled in with unwanted meanings. Some missionaries in their attempt to use another popular animal, the pig, as a symbol to describe Christ completely failed. Simply replacing one symbol with another one, without checking the deep meanings assigned to it by the local people can lead to serious distortions. It is not sufficient to exegete and understand the biblical text based only on one's own assumptions; it is imperative to discover the original cultural assumptions of the writers of the text, as well as the worldview assumptions of the people we are trying to reach. Our biblical interpretations may not be the biggest hurdle, but what we assume about the Bible and our lack of understanding of the local people's worldview is often the barrier that impedes missiological strategies.

The picture is further complicated by the fact that religion is assumed by some Western missionaries to be a part of life that can easily be removed or replaced with a different one. This modular view of human beings is not shared by most of the people groups in the world. For most cultures, life is an integrated system that is completely upset if a major part is removed or replaced. Religious assumptions are not only religious in nature but impact the very identity of a people group. Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism are not simply religions but ways of life, based on sets of assumptions that make sense of natural and supernatural realities to people in a certain culture. A Buddhist is not Buddhist because the person adopted a set of beliefs, but because the person shares in the way a community of people assumes things happen. Faith and beliefs are only expressions of the deep-seated assumptions that make up worldview. Unless Christianity is assumed, understood, and presented as an integrated alternative *way of life*, strategies to reach non-Christians may have only a limited impact.

Same Realities, Different Assumptions

In the West, people embrace scientific assumptions, such as the law of cause and effect, the existence of visible and known causes for everyday realities (such as viruses and bacteria as causes for disease), and energy being the result of interaction between atoms and molecules. Easterners are more concerned about invisible and unpredictable causes that

influence their lives, such as totems, amulets, spirits, and ancestors who they believe have power over them. When Westerners assume that space is measured quantitatively, mostly private, and belonging to a known owner, Easterners consider space as common, with ancestors and spirits inhabiting it freely, approaching it qualitatively, and assigning specific roles to it (i.e., sacred space, communal space). In fact, for the rest of the world, space does not belong to anyone; people are simply using it as clients and passing it on to the next generations.

Westerners are also influenced by their scientific worldview to believe that, even if God exists somewhere in heaven, there is an impenetrable gap between the supernatural and the natural world. Atheists, deists, and agnostics as well consider that people live under the natural laws, and that divinity is irrelevant to the already-in-motion world. For much of the world, heaven is on earth, with divinities, angels, spirits, demons, ancestors, as well as the unborn roaming among the living, although invisible. That is why Gypsies or Hindus leave water by the side of the house entrance so invisible spiritual entities can have a drink and be satisfied and not threaten the lives and luck of the living. It is equally important for the Chinese to bring food to the columbarium or the cemetery and honor their ancestors with the best dishes. Showing respect is also essential to the Indonesians in Tana Toraja, where they not only feed the dead but keep them in the house, dress them, wipe their sweat, and talk to them. The corpse of the deceased lives with the family until enough money is saved to provide an honorable burial.

Linear, non-repeatable time is equated with efficiency in the West and is measured quantitatively. Easterners define time qualitatively, related to events, and described as repeatable in different forms (pendulum, circle, or spiral). It is more important to establish and maintain relationships in time than to report that jobs and tasks are accomplished. What good is it to rush and finish a job and have nothing that adds to your honor? Work should continue, regardless of finishing jobs or not. Westerners interpret this attitude as laziness, not being aware of a different set of assumptions regarding time and work ethic. Unfortunately, Christian missionaries imposed on the rest of the world their Western view of time together with their model of worship and understanding of Scripture. That is why Easterners feel frustrated when worship begins and ends on time with no time to build relationships either with God or with others. For them, worship lasts as long as it is needed, including plenty of time to introduce important and honorable guests, time to warm up by singing and sometimes dancing, fellowshiping together around the meal, or enjoying time in nature. Their evaluative assumptions dictate that community and relationships entail plenty of time and are more important than to measure

it strictly according to a preset schedule. A God that is strictly requiring only one hour for worship is a foreign God to most of the rest of the world.

The same evaluative assumptions inform each culture regarding morality, regarding what is right and what is wrong, how to relate to truth, and how to interpret reality. When worldview assumptions inform a group of people that truth and justice are important values, laws and consequences predominate in the culture. When honor and face are assumed to be the most important values, everything else is subjected to that value. What the West considers a lie, is only an acceptable means to save face in the rest of the world. In fact, Easterners point to God blessing two midwives that tell the Egyptian pharaoh a lie in order to save Jewish babies. And Western Christians have a hard time explaining why Jesus, when asked if he is going to Jerusalem for Passover, answers negatively, only to show up at the Temple teaching people publicly. While for the West gossip is negative, for the rest of the world it is a necessary social control mechanism to bring back in line those who deviate from community norms.

To end up in a government court is a shame for most tribes and communities. In opposition to the Western obsession with justice, communal societies have their own mechanisms to take care of conflicts. Gypsies have their own tribunals, called *kriss*, where the issues are dealt with internally. Not to be able to solve the issues becomes a shame not only on the perpetrator, but also on the community whose leaders failed to reconcile the parties.

The way two different worldviews read the Scripture is interesting. The process Jesus described in Matthew 18 was not primarily confrontative. The three phases presented in the text offer the culprit enough time and chances to avoid the shame of publicly losing face. Bringing someone else in the second phase is not simply to have a witness or to put more pressure on the person, but to act as a mediator between the opposing parties. Only when the behind the scenes attempts fail to correct the person, is public shame used as the last resort to awaken the conscience of the accused that something is wrong in their life and the consequence may be ostracism from the community. Although to a Westerner this may seem a complicated, time consuming, and unnecessary process, to the rest of the world it is important to show mercy before judgment.

Worldviews and Missiological Strategies

Missionaries and missiologists design strategies to reach diverse groups and individuals around the world; however, the diversity of assumptions regarding the same religious or cultural forms clash and create confusion and tensions. Although well intended, missionaries often fail

to discover the assumptions and meanings people traditionally attach to religious rituals and symbols and impose their own meanings that are often even foreign to the local people. Out of respect or because they are sometimes forced, people adopt the missionaries' views, values, and allegiances on top of their old ones. Conversion, in this instance, happens at the level of forms, but not of meanings, and this usually leads to syncretism. Whenever such Christians are not closely supervised by missionaries or local church leaders, they often return to their old assumptions and practices during times of crises. Missiologists have discovered that real conversion does not take place unless the values, assumptions, and allegiances that make up a person's worldview are also aligned with biblical values. Christian growth and maturity takes place only when the values of God's Kingdom supersede the old ones. Faith in and loyalty to Jesus come only from a changed worldview.

It is also quite natural for a person's worldview to oppose any change. Since one of the roles of worldview is to make sense of the surrounding reality, it integrates factors that result in a cohesive view and rejects what does not correspond to the agreed view. Worldviews also supervise change. New elements are continuously monitored, and when an interpretation of the current challenge is found, it may be included in the worldview, or the new findings may alter old conclusions or be totally rejected.

Worldview change is an area of vital importance in the area of mission, but also an area where missionaries and evangelists usually have limited impact. What missionaries may do is to present a new interpretation of reality or a new set of assumptions. These new ideas set up tension in the psyche, and it is this tension that the Holy Spirit can use to help a person make major changes to their underlying worldview.

It is also in the area of worldview change that a careful study of the culture of the people by the missionary can make a tremendous difference. By studying and understanding the deep cultural meanings in the local culture the missionary may be able to use potential bridges to connect old worldview concepts with the new biblical assumptions and meanings.

Missionaries should also present their own lives as examples, showing that a different interpretation of reality is possible and illustrating the fact that living biblically leads to better results. "Come and see" is more effective than any doctrinal presentation. An integrated way of life is a powerful argument that always attracts. There is no perfect or complete worldview; but when another worldview presents more credible answers to the basic questions of life—identifying the problem and offering a solution—people are more willing to embrace it. Even the young rich ruler noticed that Jesus was offering a more integrated set of assumptions, but

he was not prepared to accept the suggested changes. He would have lost his cherished sources of honor and respect, a worldview change that for him was just too costly.

Mission strategies should take into consideration peoples' culture and ways of coping with the new. Research is needed to discover the meaning people assign to religious symbols and rituals. Stories and songs have to be listened to, observation of daily life should be analyzed and compared with information provided by interviews. Integration of the different aspects of life should become mandatory before Christianity is presented as a new way of life.

An important assumption mission strategists often failed to pay attention to in the past was the communal character of non-Western cultures. Instead of contacting individuals and using an individualistic approach, communities should be invited to test the new worldview together. Either through the tribal chief or the group leaders, permission has to be secured as a sign of respect and honor. Experience shows that when a decision is made, a large majority of the group will embrace Christianity. However, the problem seems to reside in Western worldviews that believe conversion must be individual and not as a group. Perhaps in this regard, it is important to recognize that the Holy Spirit can also convert groups of people, an important concept in order to build appropriate strategies for much of the unreached world. When the thousands were baptized during and after the Pentecost, they were not separate individuals but families, clans, and groups. Paul also baptized households.

These types of group think and communal assumptions should be integrated into a missionary's worldview about mass conversions before a truly integrated strategy can be effectively implemented in the rest of the world.

There are two major factors that facilitate change: desire and crisis. Hiebert calls them "growth and radical shift" (2008:316). When people are curious or have been exposed to a new way of life, they usually want to try and taste the results for themselves. There are signs of openness and growth. Preparation strategies should be developed to raise peoples' interest. But equally important is for mission strategists to be receptive to the crisis a group may be facing. Migration due to wars or natural cataclysmic events, immigration due to economic reasons, and political or social upheavals may constitute windows of opportunity when peoples' worldviews or assumptions are shattered and they are more open to change.

Case Study: The Kanak

In 2017 Cristian Dumitrescu and I had the opportunity to do research among the Kanak tribes in the Pacific. The Kanak people is a Melanesian

indigenous group located on the main island of New Caledonia, one of the largest islands in the Pacific Ocean. The group consists of 341 tribes speaking more than 30 tribal languages. In spite of their physical, cultural, and linguistic differences, they were all shaped by the *La Coutume* and currently share values and beliefs. Their history was marked by colonization and by the Kanak revolt against the French in 1878. However, the revolt was crushed when the French colonists managed to turn some of the tribes against the others and kill Ataï, the Kanak leader of the revolt. Since then, the Kanaks have suffered not only the trauma of colonization and being dispossessed from their lands, but have also suffered because of a conflict of worldviews.

They were further shamed when more than 4,000 convicts were brought to New Caledonia, and the island became a penal colony (Bullard 2000). To further add insult to the people, Ataï's skull was kept in a museum in France for more than a century, and even when it was finally returned to Kanak territory, the French authorities refused to allow a proper funeral and burial in the ancestral land. Since reconciliation is one of the highest values in the Kanak worldview, this trauma, shame, and humiliation continues.

The colonizers brought not only a different way of life, upsetting local traditions, but they used early Christian missionaries for political purposes. The French used their imperialistic attitude to demean the Kanak animistic tribal faith and beliefs, which finally led to discouragement, despair, and resignation by the Kanak peoples. The colonizers also took advantage of the reciprocity principle of *La Coutume* and exchanged tobacco, alcohol, and food for land. Although Christianity was used as a colonization and civilization means, it brought hope to the Kanak. It taught them how to adapt to the new conditions imposed by the Christian colonizers. Missionaries considered the locals savages in need of civilization in order to be saved. Education was equated with salvation. However, conversion happened on the surface in terms of changed behavior and a better moral lifestyle. Most Kanaks today declare themselves to be Christian, but in reality they are nominal Christians holding on to much of their animistic worldview. The apparent is clearly different from the real.

The Kanak love retelling *La Parole* (the Word), the tradition and history passed on to them by their ancestors. *La Parole* tells them who they are, where they came from, why they are there, and what they can expect in the future—the basic questions that a worldview answers. Their traditional worldview is reinforced through *La Parole*. On the other hand, *La Coutume* is an ancestral code of social relations (a set of rules and rituals) which define the Kanaks' relationships with the world, the ancestors, the land, and the community. It orders their way of living, being, communicating,

and how to relate to the group, the material world, the unseen world, and others—Melanesians and newcomers (LaFargue 2012:5-6). *La Coutume* allows *La Parole* to manifest itself among people; it is a set of practices that the Kanak have developed to give the Word—*La Parole*—a form, a body through the expressions and symbols of *La Coutume* (Klein 2012:8). This set of traditions harbors the Kanaks' spiritual and religious sympathies, beliefs, emotions, and values. Without understanding the symbols, meanings, and functions attached to *La Coutume*, one cannot comprehend the Kanak worldview.

Even the island's political authorities seemed to have understood the value of *La Coutume*. Subsequent social movements and revolts during the 19th and 20th centuries restored part of the Kanaks' traditions and tribal organization. The French government recently allowed the establishment of Customary Civil Courts, where contextual judicial practices of *La Coutume* could be implemented (Demmer 2017:15). In this court the Kanaks not only deal with the shame a crime places on the perpetrator, but with the shame placed upon the entire community. Shame affects relationships as well as the harmony between clans. The Customary Courts provide the venue for the restoration of honor. Restitution is encouraged and consensus is attained. Communal values take precedence over individual ones, and traditional restoration processes are enacted before or instead of the usual legal civil or penal ones.

A Customary Court brings the perpetrator in front of the community. Although consequences cannot be avoided, the punishment is dealt with in a communal way. Other tribe members may voluntarily choose to share in the punishment, restoring the honor of the ones dishonored, while at the same time enhancing their own honor. They act as a substitute, a redeemer for the perpetrator. The ritual is not focused on punishing the offender, but punishment is delivered so the culprit will be able to reintegrate into the community and have his honor restored. Reconciliation and the restoration of relationships are the final goals.

The Grand Hut is another central symbol for understanding the Kanak worldview. The hut is the place where heaven and earth meet. The customary space, a sacred space in front of the hut, is surrounded by tall trees that are more than 130 years old. Here *La Coutume* is practiced in the presence of the leaders of the host tribes, as well as leaders from other guest tribes. The Grand Chief is the custodian of the Grand Hut, the place where the divine spirits and the ancestors come to meet human beings. The symbolism of the hut unites the three levels of Kanak cosmology: the lower invisible level of the unborn, the visible level of the living, and the upper invisible level of the world of spirits and deified ancestors. In the Melanesian worldview the deified ancestors continue to remain active

and integrated in the life of their families by blessing, cursing, protecting, and reprimanding (Doumenge, Métais, and Saussol 1986:257).

Relationships and belongingness are high values for the Kanaks, and they are expressed both toward the spirits and fellow human beings. An individual is tied to the clan and the community, one's identity is provided by the lineage, not by personal achievements. Collectivity needs consensus, and all meetings last until consensus is achieved. All voices are heard, and the art of listening is mastered. The atmosphere is one of humility, with many symbols in the customary space reminding participants that respect and humility are core values. In the end, the decision of the Grand Chief will be supported by everyone, for reconciliation is the final goal.

Reconciliation is also the message of the Bible. Since humans have turned their back on the Creator God, his special mission is to reconcile the entire creation. God's character is at stake. Although God loves the sinner, the consequences of sin cannot be removed. Punishment is required by the law. However, God himself steps down and receives the punishment in a redemptive way, opening the way for reconciliation. Acting as a substitute, he earns the right to offer the sinner pardon and a chance to have his honor restored. By bearing the shame, he removes shame. The Kanak worldview expressed through *La Coutume* offers bridges to present the gospel to them.

Sin has to be presented as shame, both for the individual as well as for the community. Adam and Eve felt ashamed because of the broken relationships with God and with each other. They felt naked, alone, and exposed. They lost face, innocence, and purity. In spite of their shameful-ness, God, whom they shamed, came to restore their honor by restoring his relationship with them. Jesus as the Word (*La Parole*) comes to teach humans how to live (*La Coutume*) as the Great Ancestor (The Ancient of Days, the God of all ancestors) in the Grand Hut (The Sanctuary). He dwells with his people (Immanuel). This is a possible bridge missionaries could use to reach the Kanaks, a people concerned about their identity and ultimate spiritual realities.

Conclusion

Worldview change implies enabling the Holy Spirit to work in peoples' lives in order to raise awareness of their condition and the need for repentance. The meaning of "being born from above" (μετάνοια) is a change of mind, a turning point, a change in view or of one's way (Arndt, Danker, and Bauer 2000:640; Louw and Nida 1996:509). Unless the Holy Spirit touches the deepest values and assumptions, real conversion is not complete. Adventist missionaries and missiologists, evangelists, pastors,

and administrators need to re-evaluate their mission strategies. Change needs to involve more than behavior and belief; it must include change at the worldview level. Change at the worldview level usually takes place when cultural bridges have been identified in order for the message to be relevant.

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Chanchal Gayen

Contextualization of an Indian Christian Marriage: A Case Study

In July 2018 I was invited to solemnize a wedding in Cooch Behar, North Bengal, India. The groom belonged to an orthodox Bengali Anglican family and the bride to the Rajbanshi Bengali people group. Rajbanshis are an influential people group with approximately 475,000 members spread all over North Bengal and North-East India. Most of the Rajbanshis are orthodox Hindus, and it is very rare to find first-generation Christian converts. The work in their area is done by a small charismatic church and most of the converts live in the small district town Cooch Behar. The bride lived with her parents in a village which is about an hour's drive from the district town. The bride's family is the only Christian family in the village; all her other relatives practice Hinduism. Therefore, the relatives in the village were not very appreciative of the fact that she was getting married to a Christian. To them, it seemed like she was rejecting her own community. The bride's family was unsure about the way the marriage ceremony would be conducted and had many questions regarding the credentials of the officiating priest and how the ceremony would proceed.

When I reached the bride's village, her family requested that I conduct the *Pheras* during the wedding ceremony. The *Pheras* are the most important ritual in a Hindu wedding ceremony, which is usually conducted under a well-decorated canopy known as *Chadnatola* in Bengali (one of the 22 major languages spoken in India). Under this canopy, along with many other items of significance in the Hindu religion, is the altar of the fire god, who is considered to be the witness of the ceremony. After the preliminary rituals, the couple is expected to walk around the altar seven times, while the priest reads from their holy books. Without the *Pheras*, a Hindu wedding is considered incomplete. In Hinduism, the *Pheras* signify a bond between two individuals, who are entering into holy matrimony, but also for the next seven births because Hindus believe in reincarnation. For each *Phera*, the bride and groom make a commitment of support and

faithfulness to each other during the different situations and stages of life.

Christianity in India has been strongly influenced by Western missionaries and this is seen in most Christian wedding formats. Like in the West, the guests are seated in a church or a hall, the bride, dressed in her white or ivory attire (gown or saree) walks in accompanied by her father or someone older, while the groom waits in the front for her arrival. At almost every Christian Indian wedding I have attended, the best men, bridesmaids, flower girls, and Bible boy have been present. However, according to the Hindu tradition or even in the Indian tradition, these elements are not necessary and have no significance.

Another disturbing factor is that while the color white is associated with purity, it is also the color widows wear after the death of their husbands. In the Indian context the goddess Saraswati is often seen dressed in white sarees, symbolizing her purity. The color red, on the other hand, is the color of celebration for Hindus. Traditionally, most Hindu brides dress in red or in bright colors, never in white.

At the wedding that I was solemnizing, the groom was in a suit though the weather did not call for it, and the bride was in a cream-colored gown. I was assisted by two pastors. One was a Baptist pastor in his white robe and the other, an Adventist pastor in his suit. I was in traditional Indian wear, *dhoti* and *kurta*. We started with prayer and a word of welcome, after which I delivered a short speech. There were chairs around the canopy and the groom's family members sat in those chairs as they do in the church, whereas the bride's family members, from the village, did not occupy the chairs but came close to the canopy and almost surrounded the bride and groom. According to the Hindu tradition, people do not sit on chairs at a distance while the marriage is being solemnized. They usually stand around the couple. It is an expression of the involvement of the community in the wedding. In this way, the community also becomes the witnesses of the marriage.

In order to accommodate the *Pheras* and give it Christian significance, I replaced the fire alter, which signifies the fire god in Hinduism, with the Bible, a candle, and a cross. I explained to the congregation that these three items symbolize God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit and that I was solemnizing this wedding in the presence of the Triune God. I used John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" to explain that the Word is God and the Bible symbolizes the Word. I also quoted from Acts 2:1-3, "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them." This

text talks about the Holy Spirit, which came in the form of tongues of fire, the flame of the candle being used to symbolized the Holy Spirit. Finally, I quoted Colossians 2:13, 14, to help people understand that the Cross represents Jesus Christ, “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.” Each time I mentioned the word Bible I used the term “Holy Scripture Bible.”

The wedding ceremony began with singing followed by my sermon. After the sermon was the *Kanyadaan*, which when translated in Sanskrit means the giving away of the bride to the groom, which was followed by the exchange of rings and garlands. The couple then exchanged vows and the last portion of the ceremony was the *Pheras*.

As mentioned above the *Pheras* consists of the bride and groom making seven circuits around the fire. I asked the attendees, “How many days are there in a week?” The answer was an obvious seven. I explained the significance of seven days from the book of Genesis, which talks about creation in six days and the seventh day was a rest day to be kept for holy purposes. Then I asked the congregation, “If this couple makes a commitment to God to live as an ideal, loving, God-fearing couple for all seven days of every week will there be any day left for them to live as a bad couple?” Again, there was an obvious “no” from the attendees. I then invited the couple to walk around the *Pheras* and make known to the attendees that each *Phera* (circuit) represented a day of the week and their commitment towards their marriage throughout each day of every week. While this was taking place the attendees sang a Bengali song that had the message about a merciful God blessing everybody. The wedding ceremony ended with a prayer. Soon after the ceremony there was a reception, for which the bride and groom changed into their Indian traditional attire. The bride was in her bright red saree and the groom in his sherwani.

Missiological Implications

One of the challenges of sharing the gospel in India is the heavy Western influence on the ways Christianity is shared and practiced in the various aspects of life. This has further been promoted by Indian movies, which have a powerful impact on the Indian masses—approximately 70% of the population. In most Indian movies, Christian weddings are portrayed in a Western style and format. The bride is in a white gown and the groom is in a three-piece suit. People in India hesitate to embrace Christianity, and one of the barriers is their fear of losing or going against

their culture, which can cause them to be officially or unofficially excommunicated from their surrounding community.

It is important to remember that Indians are a collective community-oriented people and that many of their decisions are influenced by the community. Therefore, efforts need to be made to allow as many of the cultural practices to remain as possible as long as they do not go against biblical principles. Instead of using Western practices for important life events, it is vital to use Indian practices and only change those elements that go against biblical principles. This approach allows people to see that Christianity is not against many Indian customs and also that Christianity can be communicated using Indian forms.

In this case study the *Pheras* ceremony was reinterpreted, but many of the cultural elements were retained. Biblical meanings were substituted for the cultural meanings that went against the teachings of Scripture. When doing this type of contextualization it is important to constantly pour Christian meanings into the cultural practice. Good biblical teaching is the antidote to syncretism, a danger that is always present while doing contextualization.

The local people appreciated the fact that the wedding ceremony incorporated local cultural elements that were important to them. This approach also communicated the idea that Christianity is not a Western religion, but is for all people in all cultures.



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Agana-Nsiire Agana

Can I Get an “Amen”? Affirming the Contemporary Ghanaian Usage of Amen

Introduction

The word amen needs no introduction. It is a gem of ancient history that has not only survived the test of time, but has also proliferated across the cultural spectrum of humanity through the spread of Christianity and to a lesser extent among the followers of Islam. In the Christian context, while its most frequent usage is as a final word in Christian prayer, amen is also often used as an interjection to communicate affirmation, approval, or agreement in a general way. As such it performs both liturgical and communicative functions. For example, liturgically, it is sung as a conclusion to pastoral prayers. Communicatively, it is said after a choir has ministered through song, or at certain points during a sermon when people wish to express a strong sense of agreement with what has been or is being said.

Some Adventist commentators have recently called into question the appropriateness of many instances of the second class of usage. For them, amen is often used in ways that are contrary to its meaning and proper function. Many also feel that its frequent repetition robs it of the meaning sustained by active thinking, leading to mindless and therefore meaningless repetition. The claim is also made that such indiscriminate usage of amen is traceable to indigenous Ghanaian religions and its libational culture. This study seeks to carefully look at the claim that certain uses of amen in Christian communicative context are inappropriate, to show how the term is used in these instances is largely in conformity with its original meaning and biblical usage, and that the contemporary application reflects valid contextual interpretations of that meaning that are by no means restricted to Ghanaian thinking. Doing so will affirm today's believers in their appropriation of an ancient term that can add a deeply meaningful dimension to the worship experience that should not be curtailed if it is used conscientiously. This article also aims to reignite

an appreciation for the deep meaning of the term, and thus instigate a positive mental attitude that makes the use of amen purposeful and rewarding. The study proceeds primarily on the basis of an assessment of the etymology of amen from antiquity to date, and secondarily on a comparative reflection on the ancient and contemporary uses. Finally it offers a brief analysis of the formal reasoning from which some of the objections are raised.

In this study I will focus on the use of amen within the liturgy of Seventh-day Adventism in Ghana for two main reasons. First, the discussion on the right use of amen has increased in recent times, with some ministers advocating what they consider more appropriate response formulas for various situations in corporate worship. Further to the point, the discussion has taken on a theological dimension around the influence of Ghanaian culture on Christian praxis. Second, the Ghanaian context is the one I am most familiar with and have the easiest access to.

The Meaning and Basic Function of Amen

Amen is a biblical term of Hebrew origin. It comes from *'aman*, which means “to be firm or faithful” (Strong n.d.:536). H. W. Hogg suggests that the underlying concept in the root is that of “stability, steadfastness, [and] reliability” (1896:2). Bruce Chilton notes the broadness of the semantic range, which includes, through various verbal forms, “support,” “be faithful,” “sure,” “established,” “stand firm,” and “believe” (1992:184). *Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* says that amen is “a Hebrew adjective originally meaning ‘reliable, sure, true’” (Dorani 1996). In the Old Testament it is used to mean “So be it” or “Let it be so” (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 2013). Chilton touches on the enigma of a precise translation by offering that while “sure,” “truly,” and “so be it” may be a clear indication of the meaning of amen, “none of those renderings entirely captures the nuance of the Hebrew” (1992:185). In terms of the actual biblical usage, he explains that amen in the Hebrew Bible “typically appears at the close of commands, blessings, curses, doxologies, and prayers. Fundamentally, it is used to confirm what has been said before, by way of response” (Num 5:22; Deut 27:15-26; 1 Kgs 1:36; Jer 11:5; 28:6; 1 Chr 16:36; Neh 5:13, 8:6) (184).

Hogg maintains three categories as far as the Old Testament usage is concerned: (1) *Initial amen*—amens used before a statement that itself denotes affirmation; “So be it!” (Deut 27:15-26; 1 Kgs 1:36; Jer 28:6), (2) *Detached amen*—amens in which the statements following the amen “are to be understood from the situation” (Neh 5:13), and (3) *Final amen*—amens used at the ends of liturgical applications, usually as “amen, amen” or “amen and amen” (Ps 86:52; 1 Chr 16:36) (1896:3, 4).

In the New Testament the term is used to mean “truly,” “verily,” or as a doxological formula. Hogg maintains three classes as maintained by “the best texts” of the NT: (1) *introductory amen* (Rev 7:12, 14:4, 22:20), (2) *detached amen* (Rev 5:14; 1 Cor 14:16), (3) *Final amen*, the doxological and benedictory amens of the epistles (1896:8). The *introductory amen* is particularly noteworthy as it stands in isolation from the normal, responsive usage of amen in the New Testament. It is the usage of Jesus as per “truly” or “truly, truly (amen, amen) I say unto you” (Matt 6:2, 10:15; Luke 21:32; John 1:51). This usage suggests further inner-biblical evidence of evolution or adaptation in the usage of the term.

Without recourse to the documentary hypothesis employed by Hogg in his analysis, it is clear that as the religion of Israel became more formalized, the Hebrew word amen, which in ordinary conversational usage denoted truthfulness and reliability, came to be employed in an increasingly narrower liturgical sense as an acceptance of blessings, curses, and other dictums of Israelite religious ceremonies. Thus, it is important to establish early on that from ancient times, amen has always been used “in a variety of contexts” (DeMoss and Miller 2002:22). This reflects Chilton’s warning about the enigmatic nature of the term, evidence of which is found in the “unusual, introductory, and asseverative usage” of the term by Jesus in the Gospels (1992:185). Chilton summarizes Joachim Jeremiah’s explanation for this unusual usage of Jesus as a creative re-adaptation by Jesus of the term, and K. Berger’s insistence that the introductory amen was already a part of the vocabulary of Hellenistic Judaism (185).

Relying on usage in the Old Syriac Gospels, Chilton offers the mediating solution that the introductory amen of the Greek New Testament was a Hellenistic transformation on the Aramaic locution of assurance, *bqwt* or “in truth” (186). It is thus safe to conclude that the Bible itself encompasses a spectrum of usage that indicates the natural evolution of language within the context of changing and developing religion. The various semantic applications of the word are distinguishable in contemporary times is not inconsistent with this precedent. For example, *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary* (n.d.) suggests that amen is “used to express solemn ratification (as of an expression of faith) or hearty approval (as of an assertion).” The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2013) offers that it is “an expression of agreement, confirmation, or desire used in worship.” With the exception, perhaps, of Rev 3:14 where Jesus calls himself “the Amen,” it stands out noticeably in all usages of the word that some reality—actual, promissory or supplicatory—is being accepted, whether as desirable (as in blessings), true (as in assertions), intentional (as in oaths), or fair/just (as in curses). Thus James C. Martin (2011:179) is quite on point with his concise classification of amen as “a Hebrew term used to express assent.”

This concept of acceptance is the common *functional* denominator that is traceable in all its contextual meanings.

Recent Objections

Since the format of our discussion is primarily that of response, it seems reasonable to begin by establishing that which is to be rebutted, namely, the objections to the contemporary non-liturgical use of amen which I am calling the “communicative” usage. I will examine four objections that are often raised in informal theological discussion, and one that emerged recently in scholarship. On the informal side, I examine the views that certain uses of amen in Ghanaian Adventist worship are: (1) often liturgically inappropriate (after introductions, after songs, etc.), (2) often thoughtless or flippant, and (3) culturally indicated. Concerning this third objection I will focus on the specific position of Opoku-Gyamfi and Opoku (2017:9) who have recently outlined a case against what they call “the Ghanaian misuse of amen.”

The uses I am concerned about are (1) amen as an interjection of agreement during sermons, (2) amen as an acknowledgement after an introduction of the person or persons in church (e.g., in welcoming visitors), (3) amen as a response to a ministration (e.g., after a song by a choir or individual), and (4) amen as a response to specific doxological calls such as “Hallelujah.” First, I will outline the arguments made in support of each claim, and then to address them sequentially and systematically. Relevant definitions, background, analyses, and opinions will be provided within the context of each treatment as appropriate.

Amen Is Often Used Inappropriately

The claim that amen is used at variance with biblical prescription is often made. One reason often given is that the amen is said in situations in which the right response is not “Let it be so.” For example, when a musician or choir renders a song during a service, the right response when they are done is not “So be it!” It seems to be the not so implicit suggestion of Opoku-Gyamfi and Opoku that the Old Testament sanctions amen only in the context of oaths and doxologies (even though they also include blessings) and as a divine title. They further observe that all the usages of amen in the Old Testament point to “an acknowledgement of a statement that is valid and binding” (2017:⁴). Certainly not all instances of amen in the Old Testament are “binding” in the sense of an oath. But we concur with the view that all instances point to things said that are deemed “valid” in multiple senses: valid in the sense of being desirable, acceptable, just, or fair.

Hence the phrasing “valid *or* binding” is here preferred. In the New Testament they rightly identify the formal and liturgical usage in epistolary and doxological formulas, as well as its frequent use by Jesus “to show the reliability and truth of his message” (5).

Once it is established, however, that underscoring amen is the idea of acceptance, it becomes apparent that a wide array of expressions during worship can fit sensibly into the function of amen. In sermons, preachers often say things that are acceptable because they are particularly true. An “Amen” in these situations simply expresses that idea and such a usage bears grammatical semblance to the original adjectival meaning of “it is reliable or true,” as provided by the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Elwell 2001:268). Daniel Doriani (1996) comes close to capturing the breadth of the functions of amen when he asserts, “The idea of something that is faithful, reliable, or believable seems to lie behind the use of amen as an exclamation on twenty-five solemn occasions in the Old Testament.” It turns out then, that “So be it” is only one functional meaning of amen, one that happens to be the meaning that dominates Old Testament usage, but not the only one indicated either by the Bible or by the etymology of the word. To grasp the true denotative breath of the term, however, one must go right back to the adjectival root in which it denotes that which is firmly established as true. When preachers say things that are deemed true or believable, an amen cannot be inappropriate.

The same can be said of other forms of ministration during worship services. Often the context involves a musical ministration that is acknowledged at its conclusion by an amen from the congregation. To hold that that type of amen is inappropriate is to be oblivious to the content of the ministration. Music in Christian worship is, or should be, aimed at blessing and edifying the listeners. This blessing may be acknowledged and affirmed as desirable with an amen, much like they were in the Old Testament. This is true particularly of the content of the ministration, such as the lyrics of a song. Needless to say, Christian musical lyrics are often replete with content of myriad theological and evangelistic import, including doxologies, instructions, and affirmation of loyalty, all of which have been attended by amens in the Bible. To proscribe an amen in this context is not only to undermine the benedictory value of the ministration, but may also amount to a presumptuous judgment of the way in which individual hearers receive it. If the mode of reception is right, then the worshipper rightly uses amen to, in the words of Chilton, “confirm what has been said before, by way of response” (1992:184).

Another use of amen that on the surface may appear to be improper is when it comes after the introduction of a person or group of persons during a worship service. But here too we must ascertain what is the value

of the introduction. If, as is often the case, a person is introduced as one who is about to perform a role connected to worship, then an amen can be highly appropriate. For example, saying amen when the officiator for a pastoral prayer is introduced can have a double significance. First, it is to affirm that the individual is acceptable to the congregation for that role; that they are confident his ministration will be a blessing. Second, and less obvious to most people, it is to affirm the desirability of the role itself as a form of blessing. For example, when we hear that "John shall lead us to the throne room of grace through prayer," we are hearing not only that John is the one to take us there (and "Amen!" if John is a righteous, praying man), but we are also hearing that we are indeed going into the throne room of grace! It seems almost preposterous to forbid an "amen" in such cases. Even when people are introduced by saying, "We wish to acknowledge the presence of Jane and Joe," amen can express the idea that the congregation is blessed to have them in its presence.

There appears to be no sustainable biblical basis for claiming that these instances in and of themselves constitute a misuse of the term. Recent attempts by some congregations to replace amen in these contexts with statements such as "God bless you" are wholly therefore unnecessary even if useful in some respects. As per their biblical function, they are no more appropriate than amen is. This fact, and the extent of their usefulness, will be further explored in our discussion of the third objection.

It Is Used Thoughtlessly or Flippantly

Daniel Doriani (1996) laments that "in current usage, the term "amen" has become little more than a ritualized conclusion to prayers." What is more, the result of this ritualization is that it is often said inattentively and with a lack of seriousness. That concern is shared widely, including by me. Too often we hear heartless amens that barely reach the pulpit from the pews. Too frequently, disinterested amens are emitted around family dining tables from children who are not on the same religious wavelength as their devout parents. In fact, very often, congregations are so dull that an amen has to be extracted from them by the preacher, and sometimes only after several attempts have been made. These amens are uninspiring to say the least, and perhaps dishonest to say the worst.

This cannot in itself however constitute grounds for replacing the word. People tell all sorts of lies, and we cannot suddenly proscribe all the words they use to tell them. That is a strategy based on fallacious reasoning, because removing the words does not take away the motivation to tell the lie. New words will be found, and this is exactly what is now transpiring. Not only are phrases like "God bless you" suggested as being somehow

more appropriate than amen, it is also claimed that using new phrases will refresh the mental attention given to them. This is however true only insofar as it is realized that any increase in attentiveness is caused by novelty, rather than by the actual words themselves. Very rapidly, these new formulas deteriorate to the same state of cold formality; they too grow stale, lose the force of their meaning, and are uttered with the same casualness and flippancy as amen before them. Essentially, they die of the same disease: monotony.

Any bid to eradicate thoughtlessness and flippancy from the responses of a congregation, even if possible, must seek to reduce routine and emphasize variety. This may be achieved by varying liturgical responses from time to time, as is done with liturgical songs, doxologies, calls to worship, and canticles, or with the order of the worship service for example. Or it may be done on the basis of pure spontaneity by individuals. A formulaic amen, expected at the end of every prayer, is a very different thing from a spontaneous amen elicited from the consciousness of a person on whom a worship-related experience has an effect.

Some argue that amen is a holy word. As such it should not be disrespected by frequent or flippancy usage. If amen is a holy word it is made so by a holy context. Just as the altar sanctifies the gift and not vice versa, it is the context of Christian worship, individual or corporate, that imparts sacredness to the elements present in it and not the other way around. There is nothing holy about an *amen* spoken after an occult imprecation. Amen may be sacred relative to holy worship, but it is not in and of itself sacrosanct.

Amen is Culturally Indicated

Certainly the most interesting of the objections being considered is the one that says that Ghanaian Christians' use of amen is indicated by the religious heritage of their culture. Specifically, Opoku-Gyamfi and Opoku (2017:8) allege that Ghanaian Christians' use of amen reflects a culturally indicated tendency toward active rather than passive participation in worship; the same tendency that is expressed in the call and response formulas of libational oratory and storytelling. In Akan libation, the officiant works deliberately towards an emotionally charged atmosphere by stimulating audience participation through call and response. They explain that "With the assistants leading the way, any member of the audience can interject interlocutory responses such as *sio* or *wiee*, meaning 'yes' and 'true'" (8). Dennis Ampofo-Nimako (2012:113) however clarifies that the interjection is more a feature of a fixed, formal structure of the libational prayer, where *wiee* is said after each completed phrase of the prayer, of

which the early ones end with “nsa” (here is drink). For Opoku-Gyamfi and Opoku, “This African traditional religiosity, more or less, resonates in the various Christian worship centers today. Intermittent shouts of amen in Christian prayers are not by chance. It is by intuition, duly contextualized to conform to Christian modes of worship” (2017:8).

The problems that arise at the nexus of Christian faith and indigenous African religion are well documented. Much has been written including by this writer on the ills of philosophical and theological leakage from indigenous religion into Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy in the African context (Agana and Prempeh 2018). It is not immediately vital to rehash the detailed points of that discussion. What suffices is that the influence of culture and religious tradition on Christian behavior is acknowledged. Further, some prayer formulas employed in Ghanaian Adventist worship do bear an unmistakable resemblance to libational practice, for example, the “daa—amen” formulas described by Opoku-Gyamfi and Opoku (2017:9). The amens spoken at various points during a sermon do hearken back to African storytelling culture. No conclusion can be drawn on the matter, however, that is not debatable. The Old Testament does provide several examples of a call-and-response paradigm involving the repetition of amen at various points of a prayer or oration. In Deut 27:15-26, Moses commands the people to say amen after each of eleven curses declared by Levite priests.

That said, even if the connection is accepted without dispute, it does not appear to be a wrong reinterpretation of a cultural practice. Christian mission has suffered for a long time from numerous failures at contextualizing the Christian faith and religion so that Africans can assimilate it seamlessly and even naturally. This is an ongoing struggle of mission even today. Mission must leave behind the historical practice of ignoring, dismissing, and even demonizing indigenous African concepts and practices wholesale. Instead, elements within the culture that lend themselves to biblical constraints and can be expressed in consonance with biblical theology present an important inroad for the gospel into the African psyche, which for better or worse, remains highly tenacious. It appears that in this case, culture affords an anthropologically natural vehicle by which the genuineness and effectiveness of prayer can be enhanced in the Ghanaian setting. Indeed, this is true for many African settings in which similar cultural practices pertain. Rather than dismiss it outright, the Church needs to find ways to harness it in ways that improve corporate worship that is both biblical and culturally sensitive. Bruce Bauer’s (2007:246) admonition in this regard seems highly instructive: “Much of the syncretism that is observed in our world is caused by poor contextualization, not over contextualization.” He calls for church leaders to “learn to do contextualization right” (246). In that spirit I offer the following suggestions.

The Argument for Relevance

Within the context of making Christian religious categories relevant and relatable in an African context lies the particular discussion on how the relevance of amen can be maintained in contemporary worship settings. The suggestions that follow are inspired by the advice of Bauer who proposes “critical contextualization” (2007:249) and Bertil Wiklander (2007:119), who calls for contextualizing Adventism in a manner that is practical, innovative, balanced, and “amenable to the stability and unity of God’s people.”

Foster Authentic Worship

Worship is an offering first and foremost of the mind. No true worship can be produced when the mind is not engaged. Rather, meaningless formality results instead. For example, one preacher once told of a meeting with deacons in which he deliberately asked them to turn in their Bibles to the book of Hezekiah. For a considerable period of time they dutifully searched their Bibles for it until he informed them it just was not there. Will Graham (2017) recounts how “in a meeting I was explaining what Pantheism is all about. Whilst I taught the congregation saying: “Trees are god; rivers are god; everything is god!” one man in the assembly shouted out ‘amen’! I had to stop the message and inform the man that we can’t say ‘amen’ to such false statements. . . . In another meeting I once asked the church “Who is a Gentile?” Someone responded by saying ‘amen.’”

Another example is not directly from corporate worship but still of note is a recent online experiment in which Jacob Dufour (2018) posted the text of Luke 4:7 in a Christian Facebook group. According to him, over 90% of more than 576 comments the post received were expressions of agreement, hundreds of which were “Amen.” Worship leaders need to find contextually suitable methods of fostering attentive corporate worship. This may involve the use of music, call, and response formulas or demonstrations. The principle is that if the worshipper is attentive, then their actions and words are more likely to convey genuine intent of meaning.

Strive for a Balance between Spontaneity and Structure

Spontaneity within Ghanaian Adventism need not be viewed as a negative thing. Within the context of a deliberate plan for liturgical order and decorum, spontaneous, heartfelt, culturally appropriate worship responses should be encouraged (1 Cor 14:26, 33). In this regard, amen has the advantageous attribute of brevity. This allows worshippers to actively

respond without disrupting the service. The added benefit of its almost universal familiarity is that when one worshipper shouts a spontaneous amen, it does not severely disrupt the attention of other worshippers. If anything, it can offer them a quick mental nudge to consider more deeply what has been said or sung, and perhaps respond with their own amen, nod of the head, or other personally appropriate gesture. Indeed, the requirement of intelligibility in 1 Corinthians 14:16 suggests that amen was spoken in worship settings as a spontaneous response to intelligible words of blessing and thanksgiving, because amens can easily be repeated in a rehearsed liturgy even if the language of doxology is not understood. Hence the *New Bible Dictionary* rightly describes the New Testament usage of amen as “a natural response to be expected in public worship” (Taylor 1962:30). What is needed therefore, is not opposition to it, but a deliberate approach to maintaining order and decency while fostering authentic, spontaneous worship that amen can represent and facilitate.

In the context of a musical ministration, the brevity of amen helps to ensure judicious management of time in transitions between a song and the next ministration. For these situations, Opoku-Gyamfi and Opoku (2017:10) suggest clapping as an appropriate replacement for amen “where human contributions in the service are recognized.” I find nothing wrong with acknowledging the excellence of human agency in worship per se. The question, however, is one of what worship culture a congregation finds acceptable. Clapping after a song has blessed the audience or after an instrument has been dexterously played makes elicits a response meaning, well done. Saying an amen makes the statement, “What you have sung or played is good!” There is a difference in emphasis between the two statements. The former centers the congregational approbation on the minister. The latter places it upon what has been ministered. When the Levite choir sang, rather than praise the choir, the people acknowledged the content of the song with an amen. The latter, then, seems to be more in keeping with the fundamental idea in all expressions of worship ministration: that the content of the ministration is the blessing of God upon us, or the channel of our corporate attempt at reaching up to God, and the minister is but a vessel. The vessel may shine, but it is the wine that is desired. It seems more prudent then, if we are to develop a lasting culture of worship, to found it upon an acknowledgement of the substance of worship rather than upon the worshippers themselves.

The point on spontaneity is not to say we need more of it in Ghanaian Adventist worship, but that the spontaneity already being manifested in the use of amen during sermons and musical ministrations is not necessarily inappropriate.

Educate Worshippers on the Meaning and Function of Amen

Having said this, it is important to also address the fact that many Ghanaian Adventist worshippers do indeed use amen out of place. For example, out of ignorance many people express amen in the same spirit of handclapping after a ministration. They say it as a praise to the minister rather than as an assent to the content of the ministration. For example, as Opoku-Gyamfi and Opoku (2017:2) rightly note of many Adventist services, “the person doing the introduction of persons officiating would ask the congregation after mention of each name, “What do you say to him?” and they will respond, “Amen.”” Contrary to their lament, however, this usage does not necessarily traverse the semantic range of amen. It does however appear to diverge from the theocentric principle in worship. The amen should be an affirmation of the role people play, which is the actual blessing. “What do you say to *that*?” is also a frequent, more theocentric call, and therefore a more theologically appropriate one. The answer then is education, not eradication. There is no compelling reason to purge amen from our worship contexts. Education should encompass not only the meaning and function of amen, but also the solemnity of the meaning conveyed. The use of amen should always stem from deep sincerity. Some useful guidelines for the use of amen may include: (1) only say amen when you agree with, believe, accept, or are moved by what is said or done; (2) only say amen when you have a personal reason to do so. This may also be stated as (3) never say amen only because others are saying it.

As with all other areas of worship, periodic and ongoing congregational reflection on this element of their liturgy is an imperative. Here as Bauer (2007:249) advises, by “doing intentional critical contextualization and engage in good biblical teaching,” the church has an opportunity to meet any negative aspects that emerge within its liturgical praxis without trampling benign cultural constructs underfoot.

Conclusion

Altogether then, the claim that amen as used in the instances we have discussed is inappropriate is found to lack firm biblical or etymological foundation. Neither does the suggestion that if it is a vestige of African worship culture then that provides a reasonable ground for thus condemning it. While it is recognized that amen is often babbled from mental laxity, it is suggested that the problem lies not in amen, as a word, but in the person, as a worshipper. Amen is a rich word, capable of communicating a spectrum of positive human intellectual and emotional responses to worship; a spectrum that fits squarely within the umbrella of acceptance

and assent. G. B. Funderburk (1976:127) is correct in assessing that amen is “far more meaningful than a stop or signing-off word by which a prayer, song or declaration is terminated. It carries the weight of approval, confirmation, and support for what is said or sung.” Therefore, amen does not need to be curtailed to a few formal, highly rehearsed schemes of worship. It should be embraced as the bona fide, effective, biblical expression of assent it can be in contemporary Christian worship.

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Yuri N. Drumi

Christian Versus Heathen Ways of Praying: A Look from the Age of Postmodernity

Introduction

It is axiomatic that there is no religious life if there is not some kind of prayer. If religion is defined as “orientation to the ultimate reality” (Deming 2005:14), then prayer is probably the most important way people orient themselves to that reality, be it God, gods, spirits, something, or nothingness. In a sense, *homo sapience* is *homo orantes*. As David says in Psalms 65:2, “O You who hear prayer, to You all flesh will come.” A predisposition to pray is built into the human psyche. The desire to address yourself to a higher reality is an inalienable part of what it means to be human, to have a spiritual constitution.

Regardless of countless books on theology, psychology, sociology, phenomenology, and methodologies of prayer, regardless of myriad stories narrating personal experiences of prayer, prayer resists the temptation to be “figured out” and contained within magical fixed formulas. The church and every believer need to reflect on prayer for there is always something more to learn, more to experience, and more to be puzzled by. This is especially true today, in the age of postmodernity that presents a persistent challenge to the meaning and practice of prayer.

In his well-known book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard states: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives” (1979:xxiv). We too can simplify to the extreme and say that prayer is a metanarrative. The message of this metanarrative is very simple: *God hears prayers*. As David puts it, “The Lord will hear when I call to Him” (Ps 4:3). Accordingly, if postmodernity is suspicious towards metanarratives and prayer is a metanarrative, no doubt there is much skepticism in our age towards prayer. In the end, if “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him” (Nietzsche 1974 [1887]:181), so how can prayer not

also be dead? After Nietzsche's declaration, after two World Wars, after the Holocaust, the Gulags, and Hiroshima, faith in metanarratives has not increased.

The Problem

In what follows, I will deal with the question I consider very important for the theology and praxis of prayer: What makes a Christian prayer distinct from a heathen prayer? If one is to assume that the age of postmodernity is reminiscent of the age of paganism, then what does it mean that God *hears prayers*?

Thesis

In a sense, *Christian prayer is offered not to be "heard" or "answered" but to become an answer in itself.* Christian prayer is offered to transform the praying individual (or/and the praying community), to transform a person into the living response to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In other words, transformation of the praying individual in the image of the One who a person prays to is probably the most complete and comprehensive answer to the Christian prayer.

Some Examples of Postmodern Skepticism Towards Prayer

Here are a few examples of postmodern skepticism towards prayer taken from postmodern literary classics.

Joseph Heller, American author of the anti-war novel *Catch-22* (1961), puts in the mouth of Jossarian, a military pilot, the main character of the novel who protests the cruelty and absurdity of war, the following sarcastic words:

And don't tell me God works in mysterious ways. . . . There's nothing so mysterious about it. He's not working at all. He's playing. Or else He's forgotten all about us. That's the kind of God you people talk about—a country bumpkin, a clumsy, bungling, brainless, conceited, uncouth hayseed. Good God, how much reverence can you have for a Supreme Being who finds it necessary to include such phenomena as phlegm and tooth decay in His divine system of creation? What in the world was running through that warped, evil, scatological mind of His when He robbed old people of the power to control their bowel movements? Why in the world did He ever create pain? . . .

Let's have a little more religious freedom between us. . . . You don't believe in the God you want to, and I won't believe in the God I want to. Is that a deal? (1961:149, 150)

Another character of the novel, a chaplain, being on the edge of relinquishing his faith and quitting his calling and mission, observed: "There were no miracles; prayers went unanswered, and misfortune tramped with equal brutality on the virtuous and the corrupt" (1961:241).

Notice another novel, *White Noise*, by American writer Don DeLillo. Jack Gladney, the narrator of the novel in his dialogue with a nun who worked for a Catholic hospital asks her, "Faith, religion, life everlasting. The great old human gullibilities. Are you saying you don't take them seriously? Your dedication is a pretense?" Answering the question, the nun says:

Our pretense is a dedication. Someone must appear to believe. Our lives are no less serious than if we professed real faith, real belief. As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that someone believe. Wild-eyed men in caves. Nuns in black. Monks who do not speak. We are left to believe. Fools, children. Those who have abandoned belief must still believe in us. They are sure that they are right not to believe but they know belief must not fade completely. Hell is when no one believes. There must always be believers. Fools, idiots, those who hear voices, those who speak in tongues. We are your lunatics. We surrender our lives to make your nonbelief possible. You are sure that you are right but you don't want everyone to think as you do. There is no truth without fools. We are your fools, your madwomen, rising at dawn to pray, lighting candles, asking statues for good health, long life. (1985: chap. 39)

Then there is something with a different twist. In 1943 Georges Bataille, a French philosopher and writer in Nazi-occupied Paris, published a book called *Inner Experience*. In it, among other things, he lamented the absurdity of life, "Life will dissolve itself in death, rivers in the sea, and the known in the unknown. Knowledge is access to the unknown. Nonsense is the outcome of every possible sense" (1954:101).

But then he did something else. Imagining a dialogue with God, he inverted the terms of The Lord's Prayer. Here is what he came up with by turning the prayer literally inside out:

I sleep. Although mute, God addresses himself to me, insinuating, as in love, in a low voice: O my father, you, on earth, the evil which is in you delivers me. I am the temptation of which you are the fall. Insult me as I insult those who love me. Give me each day my bread of bitterness. My will is absent in the heavens as on earth. Impotence binds me. My name is lackluster. Hesitant, troubled, I reply: So be it." (131)

Against this background, and this is just a tip of the postmodernity iceberg of skepticism and ridicule towards prayer, the Christian practice of prayer requires more thought and theological reflection.

Heathen vs. Christian Theologies of Prayer

The rationale for looking at points of distinction between the ancient heathen and Christian ways of praying is based on the assumption that “the time of postmodernity has actually become the *renaissance of paganism*” (Bachinin 2007:165). What this means is, as we study the pagan mind, first, we become better aware of pagan imprints in our own religious life, primarily in the prayers we offer. Second, we seek for a deeper understanding of prayer as it was taught and practiced by Jesus and his apostles. Third, we become cognizant of prayer as an important tool of witnessing about the God we worship.

In the next section I will selectively focus on the writings of several philosophers, like Plato (428/9-348/7 BC), Seneca (4 BC-65 AD), Plutarch (46-after 119 AD). Some other sources will be cited, such as the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (1550 to around 50 BC). These works will help us better understand how the heathen understood and practiced prayer. Against this background it will be easier to see the key distinctions between Christian and heathen theologies of prayer. I have singled out five such distinctions.

Praying to Gods vs. Praying to the Father

In his commentaries on the Lord’s Prayer, the apostle Paul uses the expression “Abba, Father” in Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6, showing that Christians are “children of God,” and if children, then “heirs of God” (Rom 8:16-17). Jesus taught his people to address God as Father (Matt 6:9; Luke 11:2), thereby reinforcing the Old Testament image of God as a Father who is also the Creator (Deut 32:6; Isa 64:8; Mal 2:10; cf. 1 Cor 8:6), the Redeemer (Isa 63:16; Exod 4:22-23), and the Protector (Ps 68:5; cf. Jam 1:27). To call upon God as Father means to be co-responsible for the world that was created for humans to “tend and keep it” (Gen 2:15). It was a God-given responsibility for humans—those created “a little lower than God” (Ps 8:5; NRSV) who were given “dominion” over the works of God’s hands (Ps 8:3-8).

The metaphor of God as Father is more than a metaphor, it is a revelation about God’s cosmic household in which he is the Householder and humans are in the business of stewardship. To do the business of stewardship wisely and justly humans need the Holy Spirit. This is why when teaching about prayer, Jesus unambiguously pointed out what the greatest gift

of God is the gift of the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13), a “the good thing” from “your Father who is in heaven” (Matt 7:11) or “the heavenly gift,” the privilege to become “partakers of the Holy Spirit” (Heb 6:4).

In addition, the incarnation of God in Jesus as well as his death and resurrection demonstrated the reclaimed kinship existing between God and humans. By becoming “Son of Man” and “Son of God” and by experiencing death and resurrection Jesus opened for humans the door back to *Familia Dei*. No wonder Jesus said to Mary, “I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God” (Matt 20:17). In this context, Jesus’s admonition, “Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven” (Matt 23:9). This fits the overall picture of the unparallel status of the Divine Father.

Reading Plato and other heathen philosophers, we see a different picture. Interestingly, Plato speculates about how the world was created by “the cause” and calls this cause “the ineffable father of all things,” saying that “God is the best of all causes” (*Timaeus*). Although Plato does use the word “father” in relation to God, clearly his was a non-relational father, a cosmic power, a non-personal Being playing with humans as the divine puppeteer. The religious life of people is a play; their role is the role of “puppets.” People better be “very careful” and consider well what they should pray about and what to leave unsaid for sometimes the Gods grant even foolish requests (*The Second Alcibiades*). And Plato concludes his conversation on prayer as a play by saying, “we ought to live sacrificing, and singing, and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the Gods, and to defend himself against his enemies and conquer them in battle” (*Laws*, Book VII).

Do the Gods play with people as children play with puppets or does God the Father “so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16)?

To be fair to heathen thinkers, in their writings there are some deep insights into the nature of God, including the metaphor of a father and the idea of kinship between God and people. Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus (55-135 AD) draws a somewhat eloquent analogy between kinship with Caesar and kinship with God. He does so in with a string of three rhetorical questions:

He then who has observed with intelligence the administration of the world, and has learned that the greatest and supreme and the most comprehensive community is that which is composed of men and God . . . why should not such a man call himself a citizen of the world, why not a son of God, and why should he be afraid of anything which

happens among men? Is kinship with Cæsar (the emperor) or with any other of the powerful in Rome sufficient to enable us to live in safety, and above contempt, and without any fear at all? And to have God for your maker (ποιητήν), and father and guardian, shall not this release us from sorrows and fears?" (Epictetus 1904:27)

However, if read in a larger context of his *Discourses*, the God Epictetus describes is not the God that "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The Greek philosophy, supported by magico-ritualistic subjection to spirit powers, did not have room for the reality of God incarnate, of God the Father that existentially, through his Son in human flesh and blood, entered the depth of human predicament and released humans from the bondage of sin.

The Greeks did try to unlock the mystery of God, but having at their disposal only the brilliance of intellect and being deprived of a revelation of the living God, they could not and did not succeed. As Plato confesses in *Timæus*, "amid the variety of opinions which have arisen about God . . . we must be content to take probability for our rule. Considering that I, who am the speaker, and you, who are the judges, are only men; *to probability we may attain but no further*" (italics supplied). Sounds almost like Paul who said, "now we see in a mirror, dimly . . . now I know in part" (1 Cor 13:12). The difference between them, however, is that Paul could continue by saying, "but then I shall know as I also am known," while Plato could not.

To Bribe vs. To Believe

Is there a way to cause God or the gods to act upon human requests, pleas, and even demands? Can God or the gods be bribed? Ancients knew more than one way to answer this question. To illustrate my point, I will relate two stories, one from Plato's dialogue *The Second Alcibiades*, a story told by Socrates. The second story comes from the Gospels, narrated by Mathew and Luke.

To put the first story in its context, I should mention that Plato's dialogue *The Second Alcibiades* is dedicated exclusively to prayer. The question discussed is, Why is it that the Gods partly grant and partly reject the requests made by the praying in public and private, and favor some persons and not others? Towards the end of the dialogue between Socrates and Alcibiades, the former tells the following story that he heard from some elders.

The Lacedaemonians were at war with the Athenians, and Athens lost every battle by land and sea. The Athenians decided to send envoys to the

shrine of Ammon, with the question: "Why do the Gods always grant victory to the Lacedaemonians if we offer them more sacrifices and gifts than they do?" So the prophet of Ammon answered them: "The silent worship of the Lacedaemonians pleaseth me better than all the offerings of the other Hellenes." And as Socrates comments, by "silent worship" he meant "the prayer of the Lacedaemonians, which is indeed widely different from the usual requests of the Hellenes" (*The Second Alcibiades*). What was so special about the prayer of the Lacedaemonians? According to Socrates, justice and purity have much greater importance than costly processions and sacrifices (*The Second Alcibiades*; cf. Isa 1:15).

When another philosopher, Plutarch, watched what he describes as "the ridiculous actions and emotions of superstition, its words and gestures, magic charms and spells, rushing about and beating of drums, impure purifications and dirty sanctifications, barbarous and outlandish penances and mortifications at the shrines," he suggested: "it were better there should be no gods at all than gods who accept with pleasure such forms of worship, and are so overbearing, so petty, and so easily offended" (*On Superstition*, 12). With his astute mind the distinguished philosopher concluded that superstition is the seed of atheism.

The point is obvious: humans cannot count on bribing God or the gods no matter how sacred they believe their bribes are. However, if they behave justly and wisely there is more chance that their prayers will be heard by God or the gods. So can God be won over by "moral bribes," that is, by practicing justice and wisdom? If, according to the apostle Paul, godliness should not be a means for gain (1 Tim 6:5), can a prayer be such a means?

The second story is from the Gospel of Luke, and the question to be read between the lines of the narrator's script was (if I dare to express it in a provocative manner), Can God be bribed by love for the nation and by the construction of sacred buildings?

The events described in the story took place in Capernaum during Jesus's ministry in Galilee.

A certain centurion's servant, who was dear to him, was sick and ready to die. So when he heard about Jesus, he sent elders of the Jews to Him, pleading with Him to come and heal his servant. And when they came to Jesus, they begged Him earnestly, saying that the one for whom He should do this was deserving, "for he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue."

Then Jesus went with them. And when He was already not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to Him, saying to Him, "Lord, do not trouble Yourself, for I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. Therefore I did not even think myself worthy to come to You.

But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I also am a man placed under authority, having soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

When Jesus heard these things, He marveled at him, and turned around and said to the crowd that followed Him, "I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" And those who were sent, returning to the house, found the servant well who had been sick. (Luke 7:1-10)

The Jewish elders' theology of prayer was that of reciprocity. In their dealing with God it was normal to give *something* in order to get it back *plus something on top of it*. According to their theology of prayer, Jesus was to grant the centurion's request because the man was "deserving" (v. 4). The centurion, however, had a different view of God and prayer, "I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. . . . But say the word, and my servant will be healed" (vv. 6, 7).

The centurion came to the right understanding of how to approach God—not with the "bribe," be it the right religion, generosity and love for the chosen people, but by faith. His was the faith arising from the deep sense of unworthiness and out of deep appreciation of who Jesus was. The centurion's confession was that of an *attitude* rather than something produced by a *reasoning mind*.

In Plato's writings, however, faith is not a great virtue. In fact, the dialogue *The Second Alcibiades*, although discussing the nature of prayer, does not mention faith, not even once. This is a telling thing which sheds light on one of the key distinctions between Christian and heathen theologies and praxis of prayer. While Plato rejected the possibility of "bribing" Gods by sacrifices and ceremonies, but he favored the position that if humans were morally good enough, that was a reliable way to please the Gods and receive from them what the praying individual or community were asking. Interestingly, the request made by the Jewish elders (Luke 7:3) demonstrated that their thinking was more in line with heathen reasoning than with what Jesus sought to see among his people, that is, genuine faith and an attitude of trust (Matt 9:22, 15:28).

To Curse vs. To Forgive

Another distinction between heathen and Christian prayers has to do with the concept and virtue of forgiveness. What strikes a Christian reader of Plato's works is that the philosopher does not see any correlation between forgiveness and prayer. The concept of forgiveness is not found there at all. Nor do other Greek or Roman authors deal in a substantial

way with this ethical category. As David Konstan states, “The modern concept of forgiveness, in the full or rich sense of the term, did not exist in classical antiquity, that is, in ancient Greece and Rome, or at all events that it played no role whatever in the ethical thinking of those societies” (2010:ix). He restates his conclusion by saying, “To the extent that forgiveness involves a change of heart or moral state, the abandonment of one’s former ways, and sentiments such as remorse and penitence, it is all the more plausible that such an idea was absent in classical antiquity” (94).

In the pre-Christian world, prayers functioned neither to seek forgiveness from the gods nor to request their help for pardoning one’s neighbor, let alone one’s enemy. On the contrary, in some cases the gods functioned as a means to bring afflictions on the lives of those who did something wrong. The prayer requests inflicting curses on wrongdoers were “business as usual,” and illustrated the banality and normality of everyday life of the ancient Greeks and Romans. The magic formulas were “intended to influence, by supernatural means, the actions or welfare of persons or animals against their will” (Jordan 1985:151). Typically for those days, asserts Jordan, curses were expressed in so called *defixiones* or curse tablets that had been widely used in the Mediterranean during the millenium from classical time through the 6th century AD.

There was also another religious genre used to inflict vengeance on the wrongdoer, that of “prayers for justice.” Versnel defines them as “pleas addressed to a god or gods to punish a (mostly unknown) person who has wronged the author (by theft, slander, false accusations or magical action), often with the additional request to redress the harm suffered by the author (e.g., by forcing a thief to return the stolen object, or to publically confess guilt)” (2010:278, 279).

Here are just a few examples of inscriptions providing insights into the “pre-forgiveness” soul of Greco-Roman culture, all taken from Versnel’s research. An inscription from a grave stele of a fifteen year-old boy reads: “Lord the Almighty, you have made me, but an evil man has destroyed me. Revenge my death fast!” (305). A curse found in the sanctuary of Isis and Mater Magna (late 1st to early 2nd century AD).

Good, holy Att(h)is, Lord, help (me), come to Liberalis in anger. I ask you by everything . . . give him a bad mind, bad death, as long as he lives, so that he may see himself dying all over his body—except his eyes. And may he not be able to redeem himself by money or anything else, either from you or from any god—except a bad death. Grant this, I ask by your majesty.” (306)

Another example comes from a man pleading with god to curse a certain Epaphroditos who with the help of evil practices caused the complainant's slaves to run away. His "prayer for justice" reads:

Lady Demeter, O Queen, as your suppliant, your slave, I fall at your feet. . . . Grant that the man who has treated me thus shall have satisfaction neither in rest nor in motion, neither in body nor in soul; that he may not be served by slave or handmaid, by the great or the small. If he undertakes something, may he be unable to complete it. May his house be stricken by the curse for ever. . . . May no child cry (to him), may he never lay a joyful table; may no dog bark and no cock crow; may he sow but never reap . . . may neither earth nor sea bear him any fruit; may he know no blessed joy; may he come to an evil end together with all that belongs to him. (334, 345)

Another example of how the heathen understood prayer comes from the Greek fabulist Aesop. He narrates two prayers by two individuals. The first asks, "Lord God, show your benevolence upon me, my wife and my children, and upon nobody else." When his neighbor heard this prayer, he prayed, "Lord, Lord, Almighty God, curse this guy, his wife and his children, but nobody else" (СНОДГРЭСС 2014:709).

Against this background of the pre-forgiveness cultures of antiquity it is easier to realize how radical Jesus was when he made forgiveness the key aspect of his moral teaching. In the carefully crafted prayer, traditionally called the Lord's Prayer, forgiveness is one of three petitions that comprise the second part of the prayer: "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matt 6:12). It was not by chance that in his Sermon on the Mount the very first thing Jesus explained after introducing the model prayer was the issue of forgiveness (Matt 6:14, 15).

It is important not to overlook the conjunction *for* (Greek *γὰρ*) which starts v. 14 and gives the reason of the prayer's petition about forgiveness, if not the prayer itself. In a sense, if there is no forgiveness, there is no point in praying; so too there is no point in worship if there is an unresolved conflict between people (Matt 5:24). As Jesus taught, "whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses" (Mark 11:25, 26). In its very essence the gift of prayer is to be exercised in two directions, to *receive* forgiveness from God and to *extend* forgiveness towards other human beings.

Jesus reinforced his teaching on forgiveness by his famous words about the forgiving the sins of others "up to seventy times seven" (Matt 18:22; cf. Gen 4:24). The parable of the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:23-34) reiterated

the point that each follower of Jesus must forgive anyone's trespasses "from his heart" (v. 35). Finally and most importantly, Jesus exemplified his teaching on prayer by forgiving those who crucified him (Luke 23:34), a feat soon to be emulated by Stephen the Martyr (Acts 7:60). While on earth, Jesus exercised the power to forgive sins (Mark 2:10); and when he was lifted up from the earth (John 12:32) he "bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Pet 2:24). His was the perfect and unsurpassed gift of forgiveness for he "was and is forgiveness itself" (Zündel 1884 [2015]:308).

Christ's teaching on forgiveness, the way he prayed and taught how to pray, his extraordinary example of a forgiving prayer offered from the cross, coupled with the early Christian exhortation to forgive one another, "even as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph 4:32), all stood in sharp contrast with ancient Greek and Roman *defexiones* and "prayers for justice."

Religious Sentiment vs. Grand Story

The next distinction between Christian and pagan ways to pray has to do with the nature of religious experience as it was lived out in the Greco-Roman world by adherents of two religious systems. What is meant by religious experience? Smith (1998) defines it as "both special experience of the divine or ultimate and the viewing of any experience as pointing to the divine or ultimate."

Almost two millenia ago, when the Christian faith was spreading throughout the Greco-Roman world, it offered not only new religious ideas but also new religious experience. What was new about it? In particular, what was the difference between the Christian prayer experience and that of pagan worshippers? Discussing the distinctive features of Christianity, Merkelbach points out four things that set it apart from the mystery religions:

[1] Mystery religions, as a rule, can be traced back to tribal origins, Christianity to a historical person. [2] The holy stories of the mysteries were myths; the Gospels of the New Testament, however, relate historical events. [3] The books that the mystery communities used in Roman times cannot possibly be compared to the New Testament. The essential features of Christianity were fixed once and for all in this book; the mystery doctrines, however, always remained in a much greater state of fluidity. [4] The theology of the mysteries was developed to a far lesser degree than the Christian theology. (Merkelbach 1998)

As Christianity entered the highly diverse and sophisticated world of the pagan religions, one of its tasks was to turn an individual from the *sensual experience of the unknown to the faith experience of the revealed*. Unlike

what occurred in all mystery cults which were characterized by requiring the initiation candidates to swear an oath of secrecy, Christianity was a faith focused on the Person who “spoke openly to the world” (John 18:20; cf. Matt 10:27).

As Christian faith advanced, the ambiguity of the Oracles’ messages was replaced by the certainty of God’s *evangel*, and the myths were ousted by the grand story of the Word become flesh (John 1:14). Dissimilar to the mysteries that evoked awe by impacting the bodily senses, in the Christian religion it was the story of the cross of Christ that elicited an unprecedented sense of awe and reverence for the crucified Christ and the God who sent him. After the ascension of Jesus, his followers’ encounters with the reality of the “wholly other” were experienced through the love-generating presense of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. New relationships marked the life of the communities of believers as they realized they were all part of the body of Christ (Rom 5:5, 12:4, 5; 1 Cor 12). The new experience of divine love glueing the community of faith together, the transforming power of the Christian *evangel* story—these were the things that made the spiritual experience of the followers of Jesus so distinct from that of the pagan worshippers. Notice a description of the new experience by the previous heathen in Thessalonica,

Religion was no longer a formal ritual, devoted to capricious spirits, material things, frightening omens or implacable cosmic forces, or their idols and supporting philosophies. Rather, they were pouring out their love and devotion to the Sovereign God, their new Lord, Ruler of the Universe, True and not counterfeit; God Himself, not human substitutes; the God, who had disclosed himself as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Hitchman 2011:169)

The initiation rites of the mystery religions were very elaborate, some were well thought through, thoroughly performed, and experienced with high emotions. It was common for them to have the whole array of fleshly mediums, including drinks, blood sacrifices, light effects, imitations of gods’ voices, music, and dancing—until the priests’ and priestesses’ “frenzied excitement found its culmination in self-scourging, self-laceration, or exhaustion” (Merkelbach 1998). In the emerging religion of the Gallilean Man however, the experience of God was nested in the realm of the human spirit rather than planted in the domain of feelings. It was in the context of prayer to “Abba, Father” that Paul spoke of the Spirit “bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:15, 16). On the other hand, with its emphasis on faith, the New Testament does not deemphasize the importance of the body in worship and prayer (Друми 2018:80-107). On the contrary, it repeatedly refers to the wholistic

and indivisible nature of religious experience that also included the bodies (sōma) of the worshipping individuals (e.g., Rom 12:1; 1 Thess 5:23).

Seneca, the great first century Roman stoic, in his famous *Letters* has insightful observation about prayer:

There is no need to raise our hands to heaven; there is no need to implore the temple warden to allow us close to the ear of some graven image, as though this increased the chances of our being heard. *God is near you, is with you, is inside you.* Yes, Lucilius, there resides within us a divine spirit, which guards us and watches us in the evil and the good we do. As we treat him, so will he treat us. (*Letters*, XLI; italics supplied)

There is a striking similarity between Seneca's point and Paul's observation from his sermon to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers that God "is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Paul asserted that God created the nations "so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him" (Acts 17:27). However, there is also a compelling difference between the two views of God, namely, for his sermon in Areopagus Paul had a solid understanding of God's all-encompassing salvation story while Seneca did not and could not have one. His God was hidden in human sentiment while Paul preached about the God who revealed himself in the story culminating in the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 17:31).

"I Am Right" vs. "I Am Wrong"

Since ancient times one of the functions of prayer was to help people have some kind of assurance on the day of the divine judgement. Thoughts about the afterlife found their way into prayers and magic formulas offered to the gods once the person's soul reached the place of judgement.

Around 1600 BC, Egyptian scribes produced the first copies of a funerary text that later became known as the *Book of the Dead*, a manual to help the social elite navigate in the afterlife. By the time of the New Kingdom (1570-1069 BC), the book was "extremely popular" (Mark 2016) and it remained in use until the beginning of the Christian era. The best known part of the book is Spell 125. It describes the Hall of Truth, the judgment of the heart of the deceased, and the process conducted by the god Osiris. The soul of the deceased was supposed to make a negative confession to address each of 42 cryptically named gods while saying a list of 42 sins the person had never done. For example, "I have not committed sin, I have not committed robbery with violence, I have not stolen, I have not slain

men and women” and so on and on (Mark 2017; cf. Budge 1898:191). Then, the deceased was to repeat four times, “I am pure.”

Once the Negative Confession was made, Osiris, Thoth, Anubis, and the Forty-Two Judges would confer and, if the confession was accepted, the heart of the deceased was then weighed in the balance against the white feather of Ma’at, the feather of truth. If the heart as found to be lighter than the feather, the soul passed on toward paradise; if the heart was heavier, it was thrown onto the floor where it was devoured by the monster goddess Ammut and the soul would cease to exist. (Mark 2017)

A life free of grave transgressions and, most importantly, a knowledge of the right spells was a pass for safe entry of the soul into the subterranean Duat, the realm of the dead.

Jesus, however, taught a totally different way of approaching God, not with an attitude that “I am right” but with a broken heart as was the case with the tax collector who prayed: “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” (Luke 18:13). This was an echo of another prayer, that of the prodigal son: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Luke 15:11). Christ’s was a religion making the first last “for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14). Paul understood this well when he acknowledged that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Tim 1:15). According to Paul, self-righteousness or righteousness, which is from the law, is incompatible with faith in Christ (Phil 3:9; cf. Rom 1:17). The prayer of the tax collector repeats the first line of the prayer of repentance found in Ps 51:1 and as such it encapsulates the very core of the biblical teaching on how to approach God in prayer—with a humble spirit, by faith and grace alone.

Summary

The purpose of the previous sections was to point out some key distinctions between Christian prayer and heathen prayer. As was demonstrated, Christian prayer is offered to God as Father and not to God as “the best of all causes” or as to a puppeteer playing with humans. The God Christians pray to is a God who cannot be “bribed” or impressed either with elaborate worship, with eloquent prayers, or even with good behavior. Rather, he is to be approached by faith alone and in the spirit of humility. Prayer does not meet the criterion of being a Christian prayer if there is no forgiveness in the heart of the praying individual. Also, to be truly Christian, the person praying must be immersed in the story of God

and the Messiah as spelled out in the Scriptures. Finally, Christian prayer does not inform God of anything for true prayer is not about communicating information, rather it is about an *attitude*, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” (Luke 18:13).

What does this all mean today in the context of the postmodern challenge facing the Adventist Church and its mission?

Prayer as Metanarrative

As was mentioned in the beginning of this article, prayer is a metanarrative, and as such it has largely been rejected by people with a postmodern worldview. Could it be that that happened because Christians misinterpreted what God’s “answer” to prayer really is? Instead of focusing on a transformation of the heart and life of the praying individual, too many Christians have misplaced their expectations and focused them on results, meaning the list of wishes determined by sinful human will. To repeat the thesis of this presentation, *Christian prayer is offered not to be “heard” and “answered” but to become an answer in itself.*

Today, when we witness the renaissance of paganism, what is the image of God we demonstrate by our prayers? Is our God a God who “answers” according to the list of our wishes or He is a God who transforms our families, our communities, and us?

Is it possible that some pagan imprints still exist in the manner in which we pray? Have we become aware of the mission potential of non-magical prayer? Is prayer something we intentionally teach (cf. Luke 11:1)? And if we do, what kind of prayer do we teach? Are we helping students and church members “cultivate thoughts upon spiritual things” (White 1940:70) so they are better prepared to live in this postmodern age?

The youth in our institutions are deeply affected by postmodern philosophy, in most cases without actually knowing they are affected. However, the praxis of prayer is often diluted in our curricula under the vague term “spirituality.” That raises a pressing question: do we really *teach* our students how to pray? Are we even *taught* to pray? To rephrase the prophet Isaiah’s vision about God’s house being called “a house of prayer for all nations” (Isa 56:7), can we safely assume that every Seventh-day Adventist school is a school of prayer for all students and every house of prayer is a house of prayer?

What makes a prayer a Christian prayer is the prayer Jesus taught us to pray. And it is not about how to get from God what I want, rather it is about how to have a right attitude towards him, how to be right with him by seeking and desiring what Jesus outlined in the first three and in the second three petitions of his prayer. The Lord’s Prayer reprioritizes one’s

life for it extends an invitation to seek God's Kingdom first, and in itself that becomes the answer to the Christian's prayer. In other words, my life is my prayer, my life is my answer to God's call to pray and to seek first His kingdom, and my life is my living sacrifice to God. My transformed life is a metanarrative that postmodernism can neither deny nor disprove.

Conclusion

In many respects, postmodernity resembles paganism, but certainly it does not totally overlap with it. People around us are searching, but they do not search for answers and explanations as much as they are searching for people who are living answers. If prayer is a metanarrative, then my life must be a metanarrative too.

In this context, I find helpful the analogy drawn by Crossan between Paul's metaphor of spiritual maturation and that of an individual Christian growing in prayer. Paul says, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (1 Cor 13:11). A Christian who wants to grow in prayer is a person "working more and more *from* prayers of requests (complaint and petition), *through* prayers of gratitude (thanksgiving or praise), and on *to* prayers of empowerment (participation and collaboration)—with God who is absolutely transcendent and immanent at the same time" (Crossan 2010:28).

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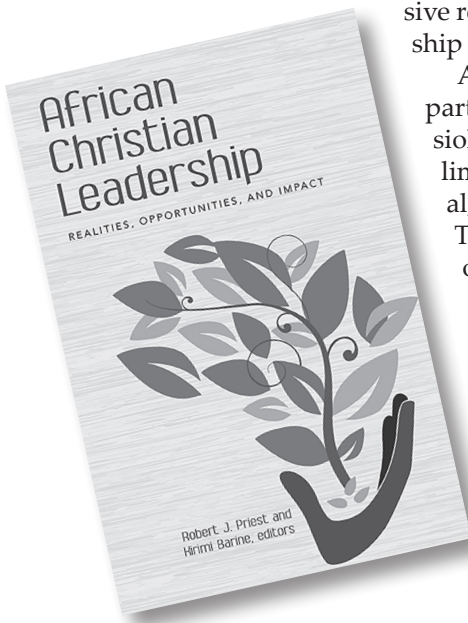
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Book Review

David Penno

Priest, Robert J., and Kirimi Barine, eds. 2017.
African Christian Leadership: Realities, Opportunities, and Impact.
 Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. ISBN: 9781626982420 (pbk). 299 pages.
 \$34.00.

“When leadership programs and courses are offered in Africa, they are often based on literature and understandings acquired by studying leadership outside Africa” (29). *African Christian Leadership* seeks to bridge that gap by reporting on original and extensive research about leaders and leadership practices in Africa.



African Christian Leadership is part of the American Society of Missiology series (No. 54), which is not limited by denominational, national, or disciplinary boundaries (xi). The book reports on “many years of solid qualitative and quantitative research conducted in three countries across a wide range of denominations and ethnicities” (xv). The three countries are Angola (Lusophone), the Central African Republic (Francophone), and Kenya (Anglophone). The fourteen contributors to the book are a good mixture of Africans

and those from outside the continent. The research team for the African Leadership Study (ALS) was composed of persons with “broad Christian leadership connections and experience in and across Africa” (6). They sought to respond to the fact that most research on Christianity in Africa is grounded in “Anglophone Africa” (8). The goal was to broaden participation in the research by conducting it in three languages that are commonly used in education and communication in Africa.

The methodology included two phases. The first was a survey administered to over 8,000 participants in the three countries, which sought to identify “African Christian leaders and African-led Christian organizations that were perceived by African Christians as having an unusually positive impact on their communities” (11). The second phase included interviews with some of these African leaders, both clergy and non-clergy. An unplanned third phase arose when the team had the opportunity to interview African Christian leaders who worked for peace after the coup by rebel groups that led to the takeover of Bangui in the Central African Republic in March of 2013 (21).

The focus of the study was “the opportunities, challenges, and impact of Christian leadership in Africa” (xvi). The study was massive, and the book covers a wide variety of topics. To illustrate, chapter 9 describes a shift in the practice of leadership in Africa towards servant leadership that empowers others. The author of this chapter acknowledges that leadership in African has often been “exploitive and self-serving” (156), a legacy of “African chiefdoms, cultural patriarchy, the remnants of the colonial master-servant model, and later Western rational thought patterns and Western religious models” (155).

However, the move is on to find a better way. The ALS team discovered that another model of leadership is emerging on the continent. Described as *servant leadership*, two key components of this new way are empowerment and downward mobility. Empowerment is about sharing power with others, rather than concentrating it in one person or an oligarchy. The development of others in the church, allowing them to use their gifts and abilities with authority, is seen as vital to good leadership. Downward mobility “refers to empowering those with less access to power” (156). So, for example, servant leaders are developing and deploying women and young people in ministry. This is accomplished through education, international exposure, choirs (that afford leadership opportunities), prayer, and mentoring (157-163). The SAL research discovered that many of those identified as influential Christian leaders in the study were practicing the empowering approach to leadership, and thus pushing to change the norm in the African church.

Chapter 13 describes 16 key findings of the research. To mention one, the researchers found a need for African authors to write for Africans. For example, in Kenya, over 61% of participants mentioned authors from the United States as their favorite, while less than 2% identified a Kenyan author as such. Other findings include: (a) non-clergy are key leaders in a wide variety of roles in the African church, (b) 60-70 percent of church members in African are women, yet they are often not acknowledged or supported in their efforts, and (c) African-led parachurch organizations are key for the evangelistic, discipleship, and social engagement efforts of the church.

African Christian Leadership is a well-organized, well-written report on some very significant research about leaders and the practice of leadership in the African church. The methodology allowed the researcher to hear from a broad spectrum of African Christians. One criticism of the study could be that a sample of church leaders and members in majority Muslim countries of North Africa were not included in the study, but this might be understandable due to the already vast scope of the project. I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in leadership in the Christian context, and especially as practiced in Africa, where the Christian church is growing rapidly.